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ARDATH

THE STORY OF A DEAD SELF

VOL. I

ARDATH

THE STORY OF A DEAD SELF

BY

MARIE CORELLI

AUTHOR OF

“A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS.” “VENDETTA!” “THELMA.”



“So I went my way into the Field which is called *ARDATH*, . . .
and there I sat among the flowers.”

Esdras.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I

LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

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1889

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CONTENTS OF VOLUME I.

PART I.

SAINTE AND SCEPTIC.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE MONASTERY	3
II. CONFESSION	18
III. DEPARTURE	41
IV. "ANGELUS DOMINE"	61
V. A MYSTIC TRYST	73
VI. "NOURHÀLMA" AND THE ORIGINAL ESDRAS .	94
VII. AN UNDESIREB BLESSING	111
VIII. BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON	127
IX. THE FIELD OF FLOWERS	142
X. GOD'S MAIDEN EDRIS	154

PART II.

IN AL-KYRIS.

I. THE MARVELLOUS CITY	175
II. SAH-LÛMA	195
III. A POET'S PALACE	221
IV. THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET	245
V. SAH-LÛMA SINGS	268
VI. THE PROPHET OF DOOM	295

28 Dec. 51
14 July 51
Gen. Rev. Ray



PART I.

SAINT AND SCEPTIC.

*“ What merest whim
Seems all this poor endeavour after Fame
To one who keeps within his steadfast aim
A love immortal, an immortal too!
Look not so 'wildered, for these things are true
And never can be born of atomies
That buzz about our slumbers like brain-flies
Leaving us fancy-sick. No, I am sure
My restless spirit never could endure
To brood so long upon one luxury,
Unless it did, though fearfully espy
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream!”*

KEATS.



ARDATH.

CHAPTER I.

THE MONASTERY.

DEEP in the heart of the Caucasus mountains a wild storm was gathering. Drear shadows drooped and thickened above the Pass of Dariel,—that terrific gorge which like a mere thread seems to hang between the toppling frost-bound heights above and the black abysmal depths below,—clouds, fringed ominously with lurid green and white, drifted heavily yet swiftly across the jagged peaks where, looming largely out of the mist, the snow-capped crest of Mount Kazbek rose coldly white against the darkness of the threatening sky. Night was approaching, though away to the west a broad gash of crimson, a seeming wound in the breast of heaven, showed where the sun had set an hour since. Now and again the rising wind moaned

sobbingly through the tall and spectral pines that, with knotted roots fast clenched in the reluctant earth, clung tenaciously to their stony vantage ground ; and mingling with its wailing murmur, there came a distant hoarse roaring as of tumbling torrents, while at far-off intervals could be heard the sweeping thud of an avalanche slipping from point to point on its disastrous downward way. Through the wreathing vapours the steep, bare sides of the near mountains were pallidly visible, their icy pinnacles, like uplifted daggers, piercing with sharp glitter the density of the low-hanging haze, from which large drops of moisture began presently to ooze rather than fall. Gradually the wind increased, and soon with sudden fierce gusts shook the pine-trees into shuddering anxiety,—the red slit in the sky closed, and a gleam of forked lightning leaped athwart the driving darkness. An appalling crash of thunder followed almost instantaneously, its deep boom vibrating in sullenly grand echoes on all sides of the Pass, and then—with a swirling, hissing rush of rain—the unbound hurricane burst forth alive and furious. On, on! splitting huge boughs and flinging them aside like straws, swelling the rivers into riotous floods that swept hither and thither,

THE MONASTERY.

carrying with them masses of rock and stone and tons of loosened snow—on, on! with pitiless force and destructive haste, the tempest rolled, thundered, and shrieked its way through Dariel. As the night darkened and the clamour of the conflicting elements grew more sustained and violent, a sudden sweet sound floated softly through the turbulent air—the slow, measured tolling of a bell. To and fro, to and fro, the silvery chime swung with mild distinctness—it was the vesper-bell ringing in the Monastery of Lars far up among the crags crowning the ravine. There the wind roared and blustered its loudest; it whirled round and round the quaint castellated building, battering at the gates and moving their heavy iron hinges to a most dolorous groaning; it flung rattling hailstones at the narrow windows, and raged and howled at every corner and through every crevice; while snaky twists of lightning played threateningly over the tall iron Cross that surmounted the roof, as though bent on striking it down and splitting open the firm old walls it guarded. All was war and tumult without:—but within, a tranquil peace prevailed, enhanced by the grave murmur of organ music; men's voices mingling together in mellow unison chanted the *Magnificat*, and

the uplifted steady harmony of the grand old anthem rose triumphantly above the noise of the storm. The monks who inhabited this mountain eyrie, once a fortress, now a religious refuge, were assembled in their little chapel—a sort of grotto roughly hewn out of the natural rock. Fifteen in number, they stood in rows of three abreast, their white woollen robes touching the ground, their white cowls thrown back, and their dark faces and flashing eyes turned devoutly towards the altar whereon blazed in strange and solitary brilliancy a Cross of Fire. At the first glance it was easy to see that they were a peculiar Community devoted to some peculiar form of worship, for their costume was totally different in character and detail from any such as are worn by the various religious fraternities of the Greek, Roman, or Armenian faith, and one especial feature of their outward appearance served as a distinctly marked sign of their severance from all known monastic orders—this was the absence of the disfiguring tonsure. They were all fine-looking men seemingly in the prime of life, and they intoned the *Magnificat* not drowsily or droningly, but with a rich tunefulness and warmth of utterance that stirred to a faint

surprise and contempt the jaded spirit of one reluctant listener present among them. This was a stranger who had arrived that evening at the monastery, and who intended remaining there for the night—a man of distinguished and somewhat haughty bearing, with a dark, sorrowful, poetic face, chiefly remarkable for its mingled expression of dreamy ardour and cold scorn, an expression such as the unknown sculptor of Hadrian's era caught and fixed in the marble of his ivy-crowned Bacchus-Antinous, whose half-sweet, half-cruel smile suggests a perpetual doubt of all things and all men. He was clad in the rough-and-ready garb of the travelling Englishman, and his athletic figure in its plain-cut modern attire looked curiously out of place in that mysterious grotto which, with its rocky walls and flaming symbol of salvation, seemed suited only to the picturesque prophet-like forms of the white-gowned brethren whom now he surveyed, as he stood behind their ranks, with a gleam of something like mockery in his proud, weary eyes.

“What sort of fellows are these?” he mused—“fools or knaves? They must be one or the other,—else they would not thus chant praises to a Deity of whose existence there is, and can be no

proof. It is either sheer ignorance or hypocrisy, —or both combined. I can pardon ignorance, but not hypocrisy; for however dreary the results of Truth, yet Truth alone prevails; its killing bolt destroys the illusive beauty of the Universe, but what then? Is it not better so than that the Universe should continue to *seem* beautiful only through the medium of a lie?"

His straight brows drew together in a puzzled, frowning line as he asked himself this question, and he moved restlessly. He was becoming impatient; the chanting of the monks grew monotonous to his ears; the lighted Cross on the altar dazzled him with its glare. Moreover he disliked all forms of religious service, though as a lover of classic lore it is probable he would have witnessed a celebration in honour of Apollo or Diana with the liveliest interest. But the very name of Christianity was obnoxious to him. Like Shelley, he considered that creed a vulgar and barbarous superstition. Like Shelley, he inquired, "If God has spoken, why is the world not convinced?" He began to wish he had never set foot inside this abode of what he deemed a pretended sanctity, although as a matter of fact he had a special purpose of his own in visiting the place—a purpose so utterly at variance with the professed tenets of his

THE MONASTERY.

present life and character that the mere thought of it secretly irritated him, even while he was determined to accomplish it. As yet he had only made acquaintance with two of the monks, courteous good-humoured personages, who had received him on his arrival with the customary hospitality which it was the rule of the monastery to afford to all belated wayfarers journeying across the perilous Pass of Dariel. They had asked him no questions as to his name or nation, they had simply seen in him a stranger overtaken by the storm and in need of shelter, and had entertained him accordingly. They had conducted him to the refectory, where a well-piled log fire was cheerfully blazing, and there had set before him an excellent supper, flavoured with equally excellent wine. He had, however, scarcely begun to converse with them when the vesper-bell had rung, and, obedient to its summons, they had hurried away, leaving him to enjoy his repast in solitude. When he had finished it, he had sat for a while dreamily listening to the solemn strains of the organ, which penetrated to every part of the building, and then, moved by a vague curiosity to see how many men there were dwelling thus, together in this lonely retreat, perched like an eagle's nest among the frozen heights of

Caucasus, he had managed to find his way, guided by the sound of the music, through various long corridors and narrow twisting passages, into the cavernous grot where he now stood, feeling infinitely bored and listlessly dissatisfied. His primary object in entering the chapel had been to get a good full view of the monks, and of their faces especially,—but at present this was impossible, as from the position he was obliged to occupy behind them their backs alone were visible.

“And who knows,” he thought, moodily, “how long they will go on intoning their dreary Latin doggerel? Priestcraft and Sham! There’s no escape from it anywhere, not even in the wilds of Caucasus! I wonder if the man I seek is really here, or whether after all I have been misled? There are so many contradictory stories told about him that one doesn’t know what to believe. It seems incredible that he should be a monk; it is such an altogether foolish ending to an intellectual career. For whatever may be the form of faith professed by this particular fraternity, the absurdity of the whole system of religion remains the same. Religion’s day is done; the very sense of Worship is a mere coward instinct—a relic of barbarism which is being gradually eradicated from

THE MONASTERY.

our natures by the progress of civilization. The world knows by this time that Creation is an empty jest ;—we are all beginning to understand its bathos ! And if we must grant that there is some mischievous supreme *Farceur* who, safely shrouded in invisibility, continues to perpetrate so poor and purposeless a joke for his own amusement and our torture, we need not, for that matter, admire his wit or flatter his ingenuity ! For life is nothing but vexation and suffering ;—are we dogs that we should lick the hand that crushes us ?”

At that moment, the chanting suddenly ceased. The organ went on, as though musically meditating to itself in minor chords, through which soft upper notes, like touches of light on a dark landscape, flickered ripplingly,—one monk separated himself from the clustered group, and stepping slowly up to the altar, confronted the rest of his brethren. The fiery Cross shone radiantly behind him, its beams seeming to gather in a lustrous halo round his tall majestic figure,—his countenance fully illumined and clearly visible, was one never to be forgotten for the striking force, sweetness and dignity expressed in its every feature. The veriest scoffer that ever made mock of fine beliefs and fair virtues must have

been momentarily awed and silenced in the presence of such a man as this,—a man upon whom the grace of a perfect life seemed to have fallen like a royal robe, investing even his outward appearance with spiritual authority and grandeur. At sight of him, the stranger's indifferent air rapidly changed to one of eager interest,—leaning forward, he regarded him intently with a look of mingled astonishment and unwilling admiration,—the monk meanwhile extended his hands as though in blessing and spoke aloud, his Latin words echoing through the rocky temple with the measured utterance of poetical rhythm. Translated they ran thus :—

“Glory to God, the Most High, the Supreme and Eternal!”

And with one harmonious murmur of accord the brethren responded :—

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

“Glory to God, the Ruler of Spirits and Master of Angels!”

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

“Glory to God who in love never wearies of loving!”

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

THE MONASTERY.

“Glory to God in the Name of His Christ our Redeemer!”

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

“Glory to God for the joys of the Past, the Present and Future!”

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

“Glory to God for the Power of Will and the working of Wisdom!”

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

“Glory to God for the briefness of life, the gladness of death, and the promised Immortal Hereafter!”

“*Glory for ever and ever! Amen!*”

Then came a pause, during which the thunder outside added a tumultuous *Gloria* of its own to those already recited,—the organ music died away into silence, and the monk now turning, so that he faced the altar, sank reverently on his knees. All present followed his example, with the exception of the stranger who, as if in deliberate defiance, drew himself resolutely up to his full height, and, folding his arms, gazed at the scene before him with a perfectly unmoved demeanour,—he expected to hear some long prayer, but none came.

There was an absolute stillness, unbroken save by the rattle of the raindrops against the high oriel window, and the whistling rush of the wind. And as he looked, the fiery Cross began to grow dim and pale,—little by little, its scintillating lustre decreased, till at last it disappeared altogether, leaving no trace of its former brilliancy but a small bright flame that gradually took the shape of a seven-pointed Star which sparkled through the gloom like a suspended ruby. The chapel was left almost in complete darkness—he could scarcely discern even the white figures of the kneeling worshippers,—a haunting sense of the Supernatural seemed to permeate that deep hush and dense shadow,—and notwithstanding his habitual tendency to despise all religious ceremonies, there was something novel and strange about this one which exercised a peculiar influence upon his imagination. A sudden odd fancy possessed him that there were others present besides himself and the brethren,—but who these “others” were, he could not determine. It was an altogether uncanny, uncomfortable impression—yet it was very strong upon him—and he breathed a sigh of intense relief when he heard the soft melody of the organ once more, and saw the oaken doors of the grotto

swing wide open to admit a flood of cheerful light from the outer passage. The vespers were over,—the monks rose and paced forth two by two, not with bent heads and downcast eyes as though affecting an abased humility, but with the free and stately bearing of kings returning from some high conquest. Drawing a little further back into his retired corner, he watched them pass, and was forced to admit to himself that he had seldom or never seen finer types of splendid, healthful, and vigorous manhood at its best and brightest. As noble specimens of the human race alone they were well worth looking at,—they might have been warriors, princes, emperors, he thought—anything but monks. Yet monks they were, and followers of that Christian creed he so specially condemned,—for each one wore on his breast a massive golden crucifix, hung to a chain and fastened with a jewelled star.

“Cross and Star!” he mused, as he noticed this brilliant and singular decoration, “an emblem of the fraternity, I suppose, meaning . . . what? Salvation and Immortality? Alas, they are poor, witless builders on shifting sand if they place any hope or reliance on those two empty words, signifying nothing! Do they, can they honestly believe in God, I wonder?”

or are they only acting the usual worn-out comedy of a feigned faith?"

And he eyed them somewhat wistfully as their white apparelled figures went by—ten had already left the chapel. Two more passed, then other two, and last of all came one alone — one who walked slowly, with a dreamy, meditative air, as though he were deeply absorbed in thought. The light from the open door streamed fully upon him as he advanced—it was the monk who had recited the *Seven Glorias*. The stranger no sooner beheld him than he instantly stepped forward and touched him on the arm.

"Pardon!" he said hastily in English, "I think I am not mistaken—your name is, or used to be, *Heliobas*?"

The monk bent his handsome head in a slight yet graceful salutation, and smiled.

"I have not changed it," he replied, "I am *Heliobas* still." And his keen, steadfast, blue eyes rested half inquiringly, half compassionately, on the dark, weary, troubled face of his questioner who, avoiding his direct gaze, continued—

"I should like to speak to you in private. Can I do so now—to-night—at once?"

"By all means!" assented the monk, show-

THE MONASTERY.

ing no surprise at the request. "Follow me to the library, we shall be quite alone there."

He led the way immediately out of the chapel, and through a stone-paved vestibule, where they were met by the two brethren who had first received and entertained the unknown guest, and who, not finding him in the refectory where they had left him, were now coming in search of him. On seeing in whose company he was, however, they drew aside with a deep and reverential obeisance to the personage called Heliobas—he, silently acknowledging it, passed on, closely attended by the stranger, till he reached a spacious, well-lighted apartment, the walls of which were entirely lined with books. Here, entering and closing the door, he turned and confronted his visitor—his tall, imposing figure in its trailing white garments calling to mind the picture of some saint or evangelist—and with grave yet kindly courtesy, said—

"Now, my friend, I am at your disposal! In what way can Heliobas, who is dead to the world, serve one for whom surely as yet the world is everything?"



CHAPTER II.

CONFESSION.

HIS question was not very promptly answered. The stranger stood still, regarding him intently for two or three minutes with a look of peculiar pensiveness and abstraction, the heavy double fringe of his long dark lashes giving an almost drowsy pathos to his proud and earnest eyes. Soon, however, this absorbed expression changed to one of sombre scorn.

“The world!” he said slowly and bitterly. “You think *I* care for the world? Then you read me wrongly at the very outset of our interview, and your once reputed skill as a Seer goes for nought! To me the world is a grave-yard full of dead worm-eaten things, and its supposititious Creator, whom you have so be-praised in your orisons to-night, is the Sexton who entombs, and the Ghoul who devours his own hapless Creation! I myself

CONFESSION.

am one of the tortured and dying, and I have sought you, simply that you may trick me into a brief oblivion of my doom, and mock me with the mirage of a life that is not and can never be! How can you serve me? Give me a few hours' respite from wretchedness! that is all I ask!"

As he spoke his face grew blanched and haggard, as though he suffered from some painfully repressed inward agony. The monk Heliobas heard him with an air of attentive patience, but said nothing; he therefore, after waiting for a reply and receiving none, went on in colder and more even tones:

"I dare say my words seem strange to you—though they should not do so if, as reported, you have studied all the varying phases of that purely intellectual despair which, in this age of excessive over-culture, crushes men who learn too much and think too deeply. But before going further I had better introduce myself. My name is Alwyn."

"Theos Alwyn, the English author, I presume?" interposed the monk, interrogatively.

"Why, yes!" this in accents of extreme surprise—"how did you know that?"

"Your celebrity," politely suggested Heliobas, with a wave of the hand and an enigmatical

smile that might have meant anything or nothing.

Alwyn coloured a little. "You mistake," he said indifferently, "I have no celebrity. The celebrities of my country are few, and among them, those most admired are jockeys and divorced women. I merely follow in the rear-line of the art or profession of literature—I am that always unluckiest and most undesirable kind of an author, a writer of verse—I lay no claim, not now at any rate, to the title of poet. While recently staying in Paris I chanced to hear of you."

The monk bowed ever so slightly—there was a dawning gleam of satire in his brilliant eyes.

"You won special distinction and renown there, I believe, before you adopted this monastic life?" pursued Alwyn, glancing at him curiously.

"Did I?" and Heliobas looked cheerfully interested. "Really I was not aware of it, I assure you! Possibly my ways and doings may have occasionally furnished the Parisians with something to talk about instead of the weather, and I know I made some few friends and an astonishing number of enemies, if that is what you mean by distinction and renown!"

CONFESSION.

Alwyn smiled—his smile was always reluctant, and had in it more of sadness than sweetness, yet it gave his features a singular softness and beauty, just as a ray of sunlight falling on a dark picture will brighten the tints into a momentary warmth of seeming life.

“All reputation means that, I think,” he said, “unless it be mediocre—then one is safe; one has scores of friends, and scarce a foe. Mediocrity succeeds wonderfully well nowadays—nobody hates it, because every one feels how easily they themselves can attain to it. Exceptional talent is aggressive—actual genius is offensive; people are insulted to have a thing held up for their admiration which is entirely out of their reach. They become like bears climbing a greased pole; they see a great name above them—a tempting sugary morsel which they would fain snatch and devour—and when their uncouth efforts fail, they huddle together on the ground beneath, look up with dull, peering eyes, and impotently snarl! But you,”—and here his gaze rested doubtfully, yet questioningly, on his companion’s open, serene countenance—“you, if rumour speaks truly, should have been able to tame *your* bears, and turn them into dogs, humble and cou-

chant! Your marvellous achievements as a mesmerist——”

“Excuse me!” interrupted Heliobas quietly, “I never was a mesmerist.”

“Well—as a spiritualist then; though I cannot admit the existence of any such thing as spiritualism.”

“Neither can I,” returned Heliobas, with perfect good-humour, “according to the generally accepted meaning of the term. Pray go on, Mr. Alwyn!”

Alwyn looked at him, a little puzzled and uncertain how to proceed. A curious sense of irritation was growing up in his mind against this monk with the grand head and flashing eyes—eyes that seemed to strip bare his innermost thoughts, as lightning strips bark from a tree.

“I was told,” he continued after a pause, during which he had apparently considered and prepared his words, “that you were chiefly known in Paris as being the possessor of some mysterious internal force—call it magnetic, hypnotic, or spiritual, as you please—which, though perfectly inexplicable, was yet plainly manifested and evident to all who placed themselves under your influence. Moreover, that by this force you were able to deal scientifically

CONFESSION.

and practically with the active principle of intelligence in man, to such an extent that you could, in some miraculous way, disentangle the knots of toil and perplexity in an over-taxed brain, and restore to it its pristine vitality and vigour. Is this true? If so, exert your power upon me,—for something, I know not what, has of late frozen up the once overflowing fountain of my thoughts, and I have lost all working ability. When a man can no longer work, it were best he should die, only unfortunately I cannot die unless I kill myself,...which it is possible I may do ere long. But in the meantime,”—he hesitated a moment, then went on—“in the meantime, I have a strong wish to be deluded—I use the word advisedly, and repeat it—*deluded* into an imaginary happiness, though I am aware that as an agnostic and searcher after truth—truth absolute, truth positive—such a desire on my part seems even to myself inconsistent and unreasonable. Still I confess to having it; and therein, I know, I betray the weakness of my nature. It may be that I am tired”—and he passed his hand across his brow with a troubled gesture—“or puzzled by the infinite, incurable distress of all living things. Perhaps I am growing mad!—who knows!—but what-

ever my condition, you,—if report be correct,—have the magic skill to ravish the mind away from its troubles and transport it to a radiant Elysium of sweet illusions and ethereal ecstasies. Do this for me, as you have done it for others, and whatever payment you demand, whether in gold or gratitude, shall be yours.”

He ceased; the wind howled furiously outside, flinging gusty dashes of rain against the one window of the room, a tall arched casement that clattered noisily with every blow inflicted upon it by the storm. Heliobas gave him a swift, searching glance, half pitying, half disdainful.

“Haschisch or opium should serve your turn,” he said curtly. “I know of no other means whereby to temporarily still the clamourings of conscience.”

Alwyn flushed darkly. “Conscience?” he began in rather a resentful tone.

“Aye, conscience!” repeated Heliobas firmly. “There *is* such a thing. Do you profess to be wholly without it?”

Alwyn deigned no reply—the ironical bluntness of the question annoyed him.

“You have formed a very unjust opinion of me, Mr. Alwyn,” continued Heliobas, “an opinion which neither honours your courtesy

CONFESSION.

nor your intellect—pardon me for saying so. You ask me to ‘mock’ and ‘delude’ you, as if it were my custom and delight to make dupes of my suffering fellow-creatures! You come to me as though I were a mesmerist or magnetiser such as you can hire for a few guineas in any civilized city in Europe—nay, I doubt not but that you consider me that kind of so-called ‘spiritualist’ whose enlightened intelligence and heaven-aspiring aims are demonstrated in the turning of tables and general furniture-gyration. I am however hopelessly deficient in such knowledge. I should make a most unsatisfactory conjurer! Moreover whatever you may have heard concerning me in Paris, you must remember I am in Paris no longer. I am a monk, as you see, devoted to my vocation; I am completely severed from the world, and my duties and occupations in the present are widely different to those which employed me in the past. Then I gave what aid I could to those who honestly needed it and sought it without prejudice or personal distrust; but now my work among men is finished, and I practise my science, such as it is, on others no more, except in very rare and special cases.”

Alwyn heard, and the lines of his face hardened into an expression of frigid *hauteur*.

“I suppose I am to understand by this that you will do nothing for me?” he said stiffly.

“Why, what *can* I do?” returned Heliobas, smiling a little. “All you want—so you say—is a brief forgetfulness of your troubles. Well, that is easily obtainable through certain narcotics, if you choose to employ them and take the risk of their injurious action on your bodily system. You can drug your brain and thereby fill it with drowsy suggestions of ideas—of course they would only be *suggestions*, and very vague and indefinite ones too, still they might be pleasant enough to absorb and repress bitter memories for a time. As for me, my poor skill would scarcely avail you, as I could promise you neither self-oblivion nor visionary joy. I have a certain internal force, it is true—a spiritual force which when strongly exercised overpowers and subdues the material—and by exerting this I could, if I thought it well to do so, release your *Soul*—that is, the Inner Intelligent Spirit which is the actual *YOU*—from its house of clay, and allow it an interval of freedom. But what its experience might

CONFESSION.

be in that unfettered condition, whether glad or sorrowful, I am totally unable to predict."

Alwyn looked at him steadfastly.

"You believe in the Soul?" he asked.

"Most certainly!"

"As a separate Personality that continues to live on when the body perishes?"

"Assuredly."

"And you profess to be able to liberate it for a time from its mortal habitation—"

"I do not profess," interposed Heliobas quietly. "I *can* do so."

"But with the success of the experiment your power ceases?—you cannot foretell whether the unimprisoned creature will take its course to an *inferno* of suffering or a heaven of delight?—is this what you mean?"

Heliobas bent his head in grave assent.

Alwyn broke into a harsh laugh—"Come then!" he exclaimed with a reckless air,—
"Begin your incantations at once! Send me hence, no matter where, so long as I am for a while escaped from this den of a world, this dungeon with one small window through which, with the death-rattle in our throats, we stare vacantly at the blank unmeaning horror of the Universe! Prove to me that the Soul exists—ye gods! Prove it! and if mine can find its

way straight to the mainspring of this revolving Creation, it shall cling to the accursed wheels and stop them, that they may grind out the tortures of Life no more ! ”

He flung up his hand with a wild gesture : his countenance, darkly threatening and defiant, was yet beautiful with the evil beauty of a rebellious and fallen angel. His breath came and went quickly,—he seemed to challenge some invisible opponent. Heliobas meanwhile watched him much as a physician might watch in his patient the workings of a new disease ; then he said in purposely cold and tranquil tones—

“ A bold idea ! singularly blasphemous, arrogant, and—fortunately for us all—impracticable ! Allow me to remark that you are over-excited, Mr. Alwyn ;—you talk as madmen may, but as reasonable men should not. Come,” and he smiled,—a smile that was both grave and sweet, “ come and sit down—you are worn out with the force of your own desperate emotions—rest a few minutes and recover yourself.”

His voice though gentle was distinctly authoritative, and Alwyn meeting the full gaze of his calm eyes felt bound to obey the implied command. He therefore sank listlessly into an easy chair near the table, pushing back the

CONFESSION.

short thick curls from his brow with a wearied movement ; he was very pale,—an uneasy sense of shame was upon him, and he sighed,—a quick sigh of exhausted passion. Heliobas seated himself opposite and looked at him earnestly ; he studied with sympathetic attention the lines of dejection and fatigue which marred the attractiveness of features otherwise frank, poetic, and noble. He had seen many such men. Men in their prime who had begun life full of high faith, hope, and lofty aspiration, yet whose fair ideals once bruised in the mortar of modern atheistical opinion had perished for ever, while they themselves, like golden eagles suddenly and cruelly shot while flying in mid-air, had fallen helplessly, broken-winged among the dust-heaps of the world, never to rise and soar sun-wards again. Thinking this, his accents were touched with a certain compassion when after a pause he said softly—

“ Poor boy!—poor, puzzled, tired brain that would fain judge Infinity by merely finite perception ! You were a far truer poet, Theos Alwyn, when as a world-foolish, heaven-inspired lad you believed in God, and therefore, in godlike gladness, found all things good ! ”

Alwyn looked up—his lips quivered.

“ Poet—poet ! ” he murmured—“ why taunt

me with the name?" He started upright in his chair—"Let me tell you all," he said suddenly; "you may as well know what has made me the useless wreck I am; though perhaps I shall only weary you."

"Far from it," answered Heliobas gently. "Speak freely—but remember I do not compel your confidence."

"On the contrary, I think you do!" and again that faint, half-mournful smile shone for an instant in his deep dark eyes, "though you may not be conscious of it. Anyhow I feel impelled to unburden my heart to you:—I have kept silence so long! You know what it is in the world,...one must always keep silence, always shut in one's grief and force a smile, in company with the rest of the tormented forced-smiling crowd. We can never be ourselves—our veritable selves—for if we were, the air would resound with our ceaseless lamentations! It is *horrible* to think of all the pent-up sufferings of humanity—all the inconceivably hideous agonies that remain for ever dumb and unrevealed! When I was young,—how long ago that seems! yes, though my actual years are but thirty, I feel an alder-elde of accumulated centuries upon me—when I was young, the dream

CONFESSION.

of my life was Poesy. Perhaps I inherited the fatal love of it from my mother—she was a Greek—and she had a subtle music in her that nothing could quell, not even my father's English coldness. She named me Theos, little guessing what a dreary sarcasm that name would prove! It was well I think that she died early."

"Well for her, but perhaps not so well for you," said Heliobas with a keen, kindly glance at him.

Alwyn sighed. "Nay, well for us both,—for I should have chafed at her loving restraint, and she would unquestionably have been disappointed in me. My father was a conscientious, methodical business man, who spent all his days up to almost the last moment of his life in amassing money, though it never gave him any joy so far as I could see, and when at his death I became sole possessor of his hardly-earned fortune, I felt far more sorrow than satisfaction. I wished he had spent his gold on himself and left me poor, for it seemed to me I had need of nothing save the little I earned by my pen—I was content to live like an anchorite and dine off a crust for the sake of the divine Muse I worshipped. Fate however willed it

otherwise,—and though I scarcely cared for the wealth I inherited, it gave me at least one blessing—that of perfect independence. I was free to follow my own chosen vocation, and for a brief wondering-while I deemed myself happy,...happy as Keats must have been when the fragment of ‘*Hyperion*’ broke from his frail life as thunder breaks from a summer-cloud. I was as a monarch swaying a sceptre that commanded both earth and heaven ;—a kingdom was mine—a kingdom of golden ether, peopled with shining shapes Protean,—alas ! its gates are shut upon me now, and I shall enter it no more !”

“‘No more’ is a long time, my friend!” interposed Heliobas gently. “You are too despondent,—perchance too diffident, concerning your own ability.”

“Ability!” and he laughed wearily. “I have none,—I am as weak and inapt as an untaught child—the music of my heart is silenced ! Yet there is nothing I would not do to regain the ravishment of the past—when the sight of the sunset across the hills, or the moon’s silver transfiguration of the sea filled me with deep and indescribable ecstasy—when the thought of Love, like a full chord struck from a magic harp, set my pulses throbbing with

delirious delight — fancies, thick as leaves in summer crowded my brain—Earth was a round charm hung on the breast of a smiling Divinity — men were gods — women were angels! — the world seemed but a wide scroll for the signatures of poets, and mine, I swore, should be clearly written!”

He paused, as though ashamed of his own fervour and glanced at Heliobas who, leaning a little forward in his chair, was regarding him with friendly and attentive interest; then he continued more calmly—

“Enough! I think I had something in me then,—something that was new and wild and, though it may seem self-praise to say so, full of that witching glamour we name Inspiration; but whatever that something was, call it genius, a trick of song, what you will,—it was soon crushed out of me. The world is fond of slaying its singing-birds and devouring them for daily fare—one rough pressure of finger and thumb on the little melodious throats, and they are mute for ever. So I found, when at last in mingled pride, hope, and fear I published my poems, seeking for them no other recompense save fair hearing and justice. They obtained neither—they were tossed carelessly by a few critics from hand to hand,

jeered at for a while, and finally flung back to me as lies—lies all! The finely-spun web of airy fancy,—the delicate interwoven intricacies of thought,—these were torn to shreds with as little compunction as idle children feel when destroying for their own cruel sport the velvety wonder of a moth's wing, or the radiant rose and emerald pinions of a dragon-fly. I was a fool—so I was told with many a languid sneer and stale jest—to talk of hidden mysteries in the whisper of the wind and the dash of the waves—such sounds were but common cause and effect. The stars were merely conglomerated masses of heated vapour condensed by the work of ages into meteorites and from meteorites into worlds—and these went on rolling in their appointed orbits, for what reason nobody knew, but then nobody cared! And Love—the key-note of the theme to which I had set my mistaken life in tune—Love was only a graceful word used to politely define the low but very general sentiment of coarse animal attraction—in short, poetry such as mine was altogether absurd and out of date when confronted with the facts of every-day existence—facts which plainly taught us that man's chief business here below was simply to live, breed, and die—the life of a silk-worm or

CONFESSION.

caterpillar on a slightly higher platform of ability ;—beyond this—nothing !”

“ Nothing ?” murmured Heliobas, in a tone of suggestive inquiry—“ really nothing ?”

“ Nothing !” repeated Alwyn, with an air of resigned hopelessness ; “ for I learned that, according to the results arrived at by the most advanced thinkers of the day, there was no God, no Soul, no Hereafter—the loftiest efforts of the highest heaven-aspiring minds were doomed to end in non-fruition, failure, and annihilation. Among all the desperately hard truths that came rattling down upon me like a shower of stones, I think this was the crowning one that killed whatever genius I had. I use the word ‘genius’ foolishly—though, after all, genius itself is nothing to boast of, since it is only a morbid and unhealthy condition of the intellectual faculties, or at least was demonstrated to me as such by a scientific friend of my own who, seeing I was miserable, took great pains to make me more so if possible. He proved,—to his own satisfaction if not altogether to mine,—that the abnormal position of certain molecules in the brain, produced an eccentricity or peculiar bias in one direction which, practically viewed, might be described as an intelligent form of monomania, but which most

people chose to term 'genius,' and that from a purely scientific standpoint it was evident that the poets, painters, musicians, sculptors, and all the widely-renowned 'great ones' of the earth should be classified as so many brains more or less affected by abnormal molecular formation, which strictly speaking amounted to brain-deformity. He assured me, that to the properly balanced, healthily organized brain of the human animal, genius was an impossibility—it was a malady as unnatural as rare. 'And it is singular, very singular,' he added with a complacent smile, 'that the world should owe all its finest art and literature merely to a few varieties of molecular disease!' I thought it singular enough, too,—however, I did not care to argue with him; I only felt that if the illness of genius had at any time affected *me*, it was pretty well certain I should now suffer no more from its delicious pangs and honey-sweet fever. I was cured! The probing-knife of the world's cynicism had found its way to the musically throbbing centre of divine disquietude in my brain, and had there cut down the growth of fair imaginations for ever. I thrust aside the bright illusions that had once been my gladness; I forced myself to look with unflinching eyes at the wide waste of universal Nothing-

CONFESSION.

ness revealed to me by the rigid positivists and iconoclasts of the century ;—but my heart died within me ; my whole being froze as it were into an icy apathy,—I wrote no more ; I doubt whether I shall ever write again. Of a truth, there is nothing to write about. All has been said. The days of the Troubadours are past,—one cannot string canticles of love for men and women whose ruling passion is the greed of gold. Yet I have sometimes thought life would be drearier even than it is, were the voices of poets altogether silent ;—and I wish—yes ! I wish I had it in my power to brand my sign-manual on the brazen face of this coldly callous age—brand it deep in those letters of living fire called Fame !”

A look of baffled longing and ungratified ambition came into his musing eyes,—his strong, shapely white hand clenched nervously, as though it grasped some unseen yet perfectly tangible substance. Just then the storm without, which had partially lulled during the last few minutes, began its wrath anew : a glare of lightning blazed against the uncurtained window, and a heavy clap of thunder burst overhead with the sudden crash of an exploding bomb.

“You care for Fame ?” asked Heliobas,

abruptly, as soon as the terrific uproar had subsided into a distant, dull rumbling mingled with the pattering dash of hail.

“I care for it—yes!” replied Alwyn, and his voice was very low and dreamy. “For though the world is a grave-yard, as I have said, full of unmarked tombs, still here and there we find graves, such as Shelley’s or Byron’s, whereon pale flowers, like sweet suggestions of ever-silenced music, break into continuous bloom. And shall I not win my own death-garland of asphodel?”

There was an indescribable, almost heart-rending pathos in his manner of uttering these last words—a hopelessness of effort and a despairing sense of failure which he himself seemed conscious of, for, meeting the fixed and earnest gaze of Heliobas, he quickly relapsed into his usual tone of indolent indifference.

“You see,” he said, with a forced smile, “my story is not very interesting! No hairbreadth escapes, no thrilling adventures, no love intrigues—nothing but mental misery, for which few people have any sympathy. A child with a cut finger gets more universal commiseration than a man with a tortured brain and breaking heart, yet there can be no question as to which is the most intense and long-enduring anguish

CONFESSION.

of the two. However, such as my troubles are I have told you all. I have laid bare my 'wound of living'—a wound that throbs and burns, and aches, more intolerably with every passing hour and day—it is not unnatural, I think, that I should seek for a little cessation of suffering : a brief, dreaming space in which to rest for a while, and escape from the deathful Truth—Truth, that like the flaming sword placed east of the fabled garden of Eden, turns ruthlessly every way, keeping us out of the forfeited paradise of imaginative aspiration, which made the men of old time great because they deemed themselves immortal. It was a glorious faith!..... that strong consciousness, that in the change and upheaval of whole universes the soul of man should for ever over-ride disaster! But now that we know ourselves to be of no more importance, relatively speaking, than the animalcula in a drop of stagnant water, what great works can be done, what noble deeds accomplished, in the face of the declared and proved futility of everything? Still, if you can, as you say, liberate me from this fleshly prison, and give me new sensations and different experiences, why then let me depart with all possible speed :—for I am certain I shall find in the storm-swept areas of space nothing worse

than life as lived in this present world. Remember, I am quite incredulous as to your professed power—" he paused and glanced at the white-robed, priestly figure opposite, then added, lightly, "but I am curious to test it all the same. Are you ready to begin your spells?—and shall I say the *Nunc Dimittis*?"





CHAPTER III.

DEPARTURE.

HELIOBAS was silent—he seemed engaged in deep and anxious thought,—and he kept his steadfast eyes fixed on Alwyn's countenance, as though he sought there the clue to some difficult problem.

“What do you know of the *Nunc Dimittis*?” he asked at last, with a half smile. “You might as well say the *Pater Noster*,—both canticle and prayer would be equally unmeaning to you! For poet as you are,—or let me say as you *were*,—inasmuch as no atheist was ever a poet at the same time——”

“You are wrong,” interrupted Alwyn quickly. “Shelley was an atheist.”

“Shelley, my good friend, was *not* an atheist.¹ He strove to be one,—nay, he made pretence

¹ See the last two verses of *Adonais*.

to be one,—but throughout his poems we hear the voice of his inner and better self appealing to that Divinity and Eternity which, in spite of the material part of him, he instinctively felt existent in his own being. I repeat, poet as you *were*, and poet as you will be again when the clouds on your mind are cleared,—you present the strange, but not uncommon spectacle of an Immortal Spirit fighting to disprove its own Immortality. In a word, you will not believe in the Soul.”

“ I cannot ! ” said Alwyn, with a hopeless gesture.

“ Why ? ”

“ Science can give us no positive proof of its existence ; it cannot be defined.”

“ What do you mean by Science ? ” demanded Heliobas. “ The foot of the mountain, at which men now stand, grovelling and uncertain how to climb ? or the glittering summit itself which touches God’s throne ? ”

Alwyn made no answer.

“ Tell me,” pursued Heliobas, “ how do you define the vital principle ? What mysterious agency sets the heart beating and the blood flowing ? By the small porter’s lantern of to-day’s so-called Science, will you fling a light on the dark riddle of an apparently purpose-

less Universe, and explain to me why we live at all ?”

“Evolution,” responded Alwyn shortly, “and Necessity.”

“Evolution from what ?” persisted Heliobas. “From one atom ? *What* atom ? And *from whence* came the atom ? And why the *Necessity* of any atom ?”

“The human brain reels at such questions !” said Alwyn, vexedly and with impatience. “I cannot answer them—no one can !”

“No one ?” Heliobas smiled very tranquilly. “Do not be too sure of that ! And why should the human brain ‘reel’ ?—the sagacious, calculating, clear human brain that never gets tired, or puzzled, or perplexed !—that settles everything in the most practical and common-sense manner, and disposes of God altogether as an extraneous sort of bargain not wanted in the general economy of our little solar system ! Aye, the human brain is a wonderful thing !—and yet by a sharp well-directed knock with this”—and he took up from the table a paper-knife with a massive silver-mounted weighty horn-handle—“I could deaden it in such wise that the *Soul* could no more hold any communication with it, and it would lie an inert mass in the cranium, of

no more use to its owner than a paralysed limb.”

“ You mean to infer that the brain cannot act without the influence of the soul ? ”

“ Precisely ! If the hands on the telegraph dial will not respond to the electric battery, the telegram cannot be deciphered. But it would be foolish to deny the existence of the electric battery because the dial is unsatisfactory ! In like manner, when, by physical incapacity, or inherited disease, the brain can no longer receive the impressions or electric messages of the Spirit, it is practically useless. Yet the Spirit is there all the same, dumbly waiting for release and another chance of expansion.”

“ Is this the way you account for idiotcy and mania ? ” asked Alwyn incredulously.

“ Most certainly ; idiotcy and mania always come from man’s interference with the laws of health and of nature—never otherwise. The Soul placed within us by the Creator is meant to be fostered by man’s unfettered Will ; if man chooses to employ that unfettered Will in wrong directions, he has only himself to blame for the disastrous results that follow. You may perhaps ask why God has thus left our wills unfettered :

DEPARTURE.

the answer is simple—that we may serve Him by *choice* and not by *compulsion*. Among the myriad million worlds that acknowledge His goodness gladly and undoubtingly, why should He seek to force unwilling obedience from us castaways!”

“As we are on this subject,” said Alwyn, with a tinge of satire in his tone, “if you grant a God, and make Him out to be Supreme Love, why in the name of His supposed inexhaustible beneficence should we be castaways at all?”

“Because in our over-weening pride and egotism we have *elected* to be such,” replied Heliobas. “As angels have fallen, so have we. But we are not altogether castaways now, since this signal,” and he touched the cross on his breast, “shone in heaven.”

Alwyn shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

“Pardon me,” he murmured coldly, “with every desire to respect your religious scruples, I really cannot, personally speaking, accept the tenets of a worn-out faith, which all the most intellectual minds of the day reject as mere ignorant superstition. The carpenter’s son of Judea was no doubt a very estimable person,—a socialist teacher whose doctrines were very excellent in theory but impossible of practice

That there was anything divine about Him I utterly deny ; and I confess I am surprised that you, a man of evident culture, do not seem to see the hollow absurdity of Christianity as a system of morals and civilization. It is an ever-sprouting seed of discord and hatred between nations ; it has served as a *casus belli* of the most fanatical and merciless character ; it is answerable for whole seas of cruel and unnecessary bloodshed”

“Have you nothing *new* to say on the subject ?” interposed Heliobas with a slight smile. “I have heard all this so often before, from divers kinds of men both educated and ignorant, who have a wilful habit of forgetting all that Christ Himself prophesied concerning His creed of Self-renunciation, so difficult to selfish humanity : ‘*Think not that I come to send peace on the earth. I come, not to send peace, but a sword.*’ Again, ‘*Ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake*’ ‘*all ye shall be offended because of me.*’ Such plain words as these seem utterly thrown away upon this present generation. And do you know I find a curious lack of originality among so-called ‘freethinkers’ ; in fact their thoughts can hardly be designated as ‘free’ when they all run in such extremely narrow grooves of

DEPARTURE.

similitude—a flock of sheep mildly trotting under the guidance of the butcher to the slaughter-house could not be more tamely alike in their bleating ignorance as to where they are going. Your opinions, for instance, differ scarce a whit from those of the common boor who, reading his penny Radical paper, thinks he can dispense with God, and talks of the ‘carpenter’s son of Judea’ with the same easy flippancy and scant reverence as yourself. The ‘intellectual minds of the day’ to which you allude are extraordinarily limited of comprehension, and none of them, literary or otherwise, have such a grasp of knowledge as any of these dead and gone authors,” and he waved his hand towards the surrounding loaded bookshelves, “who lived centuries ago, and are now, as far as the general public is concerned, forgotten. All the volumes you see here are vellum manuscripts copied from the original slabs of baked clay, stone tablets and engraved sheets of ivory, and among them is an ingenious treatise by one Remeni Adranos, chief astronomer to the then king of Babylonia, setting forth the Atom and Evolution theory with far more clearness and precision than any of your modern professors. All such propositions are old—old as the hills, I assure you: and these

days in which you live are more suggestive of the second childhood of the world than its progressive prime. Especially in your own country the general dotage seems to have reached a sort of climax, for there you have the people actually forgetting, deriding or denying their greatest men who form the only lasting glories of their history; they have even done their futile best to tarnish the unsoilable fame of Shakespeare. In that land you,—who, according to your own showing, started for the race of life full of high hopes and inspiration to still higher endeavour—you have been poisoned by the tainted atmosphere of Atheism which is slowly and insidiously spreading itself through all ranks, particularly among the upper classes, who, while becoming every day more lax in their morals and more dissolute of behaviour, consider themselves far too wise and ‘highly cultured’ to believe in anything. It is a most unwholesome atmosphere, charged with the morbidities and microbes of national disease and downfall; it is difficult to breathe it without becoming fever-smitten; and in your denial of the divinity of Christ, I do not blame you any more than I would blame a poor creature struck down by a plague. You have caught the negative, agnostic and atheistical infection

from others,—it is not the natural, healthy condition of your temperament.”

“On the contrary it *is*, so far as that point goes,” said Alwyn with sudden heat—“I tell you I am amazed,—utterly amazed, that you, with your intelligence, should uphold such a barbaric idea as the Divinity of Christ! Human reason revolts at it,—and after all, make as light of it as you will, reason is the only thing that exalts us a little above the level of the beasts.”

“Nay,—the beasts share the gift of reason in common with us,” replied Heliobas, “and Man only proves his ignorance if he denies the fact. Often indeed the very insects show superior reasoning ability to ourselves,—any thoroughly capable naturalist would bear me out in this assertion.”

“Well, well!”—and Alwyn grew impatient—“reason or no reason, I again repeat that the legend on which Christianity is founded is absurd and preposterous,—why, if there were a grain of truth in it, Judas Iscariot instead of being universally condemned, ought to be honoured and canonized as the first of saints!”

“Must I remind you of your early lesson days?” asked Heliobas mildly. “You will

find it written in a Book you appear to have forgotten, that Christ expressly prophesied 'Woe to that man' by whom He was betrayed. I tell you, little as you credit it, there is not a word that the Sinless One uttered while on this earth, that has not been or shall not be in time fulfilled. But I do not wish to enter into any controversies with you;—you have told me your story,—I have heard it with interest,—and I may add with sympathy. You are a poet, struck dumb by Materialism because you lacked strength to resist the shock,—you would fain recover your singing-speech,—and this is in truth the reason why you have come to me. You think that if you could gain some of the strange experiences which others have had while under my influence, you might win back your lost inspiration,—though you do not know *why* you think this—neither do I—I can only guess."

"And your guess is . . . ?" demanded Alwyn with an air of affected indifference.

"That some higher influence is working for your rescue and safety," replied Heliobas. "What influence I dare not presume to imagine, but—there are always angels near!"

"Angels!" Alwyn laughed aloud. "How many more fairy tales are you going to weave

DEPARTURE.

tor me out of your fertile Oriental imagination? Angels!.. See here, my good Heliobas, I am perfectly willing to grant that you may be a very clever man with an odd prejudice in favour of Christianity,—but I must request that you will not talk to me of angels and spirits or any such nonsense, as if I were a child waiting to be amused, instead of a full-grown man with . . .”

“With so full-grown an intellect that it has out-grown God!” finished Heliobas serenely. “Quite so! Yet angels after all are only immortal Souls such as yours or mine when set free of their earthly tenements. For instance, when I look at you thus,—and he raised his eyes with a lustrous piercing glance—“I see the proud, strong and rebellious Angel in you far more distinctly than your outward shape of man...and you... when you look at me——”

He broke off, for Alwyn at that moment sprang from his chair, and, staring fixedly at him, uttered a quick fierce exclamation.

“Ah! I know you now!” he cried in sudden and extraordinary excitement—“I know you well! We have met before!.. Why,—after all that has passed,—do we meet again?”

This singular speech was accompanied by a still more singular transfiguration of countenance—a dark fiery glory burned in his eyes, and, in the stern, frowning wonder and defiance of his expression and attitude, there was something grand yet terrible,—menacing yet supernaturally sublime. He stood so for an instant's space, majestically sombre, like some haughty, discrowned emperor confronting his conqueror, . . . a rumbling long-continued roll of thunder outside seemed to recall him to himself, and he pressed his hand tightly down over his eyelids, as though to shut out some overwhelming vision. After a pause he looked up again,—wildly, confusedly,—almost beseechingly,—and Heliobas observing this, rose and advanced towards him.

“Peace!” he said, in low, impressive tones,—“we have recognized each other,—but on earth such recognitions are brief and soon forgotten!” He waited for a few seconds,—then resumed lightly, “Come, look at me now! . . . what do you see?”

Alwyn scanned his features eagerly and with some bewilderment.

“Nothing . . . but yourself!” he replied, sighing deeply as he spoke—“yet . . . oddly enough, a moment ago I fancied you had altogether a

DEPARTURE.

different appearance,—and I thought I saw . . . no matter what! . . . I cannot describe it!” His brows contracted in a puzzled line. “It was a curious phenomenon—very curious . . . and it affected me strangely . . .” he stopped abruptly, —then added, with a slight flush of annoyance on his face, “I perceive you are an adept in the art of optical illusion!”

Heliobas laughed softly. “Of course! What else can you expect of a charlatan, a trickster, and a monk to boot! Deception, deception throughout, my dear sir! . . . and have you not *asked* to be deceived?”

There was a fine, scarcely perceptible satire in his manner; . . . he glanced at the tall oaken clock that stood in one corner of the room—its hands pointed to eleven. “Now, Mr. Alwyn,” he went on, “I think we have talked quite enough for this evening, and my advice is, that you retire to rest and think over what I have said to you. I am willing to help you if I can,—but with your beliefs, or rather your non-beliefs, I do not hesitate to tell you frankly that the exertion of *my* internal force upon *yours* in your present condition might be fraught with extreme danger and suffering. You have spoken of Truth, ‘the deathful Truth’; this being, however, nothing but Truth according to the world’s

opinion, which changes with every passing generation, and therefore is not Truth at all. There is another Truth—the everlasting Truth—the pivot of all life, which never changes;—and it is with this alone that my science deals. Were I to set you at liberty as you desire,—were your intelligence too suddenly awakened to the blinding awfulness of your mistaken notions of life, death and futurity, the result might be more overpowering than either you or I can imagine! I have told you what I can do,—your incredulity does not alter the fact of my capacity. I can sever you,—that is, your Soul, which you cannot define but which nevertheless exists,—from your body, like a moth from its chrysalis; but I dare not even picture to myself what scorching flame the moth might not heedlessly fly into! You might in your temporary state of release find that new impetus to your thoughts you so ardently desire, or you might not,—in short, it is impossible to form a guess as to whether your experience might be one of supernal ecstasy or inconceivable horror.” He paused a moment,—Alwyn was watching him with a close intentness that bordered on fascination, and presently he continued, “It is best, from all points of view, that you should consider the matter more thoroughly than you

DEPARTURE.

have yet done ;—think it over well and carefully until this time to-morrow—then, if you are quite resolved . . .

“I am resolved *now!*” said Alwyn slowly and determinately. “If you are so certain of your influence, come! . . . unbar my chains! . . . open the prison-door! Let me go hence to-night ;—there is no time like the present!”

“To-night!” and Heliobas turned his keen, bright eyes full upon him, with a look of amazement and reproach. . . “To-night! without faith, preparation or prayer, you are willing to be tossed through the realms of space like a grain of dust in a whirling tempest? Beyond the glittering gyration of unnumbered stars—through the sword-like flash of streaming comets—through darkness—through light—through depths of profoundest silence,—over heights of vibrating sound—you—*you* will dare to wander in these God-invested regions—you, a blasphemer and a doubter of God!”

His voice thrilled with passion,—his aspect was so solemn, and earnest, and imposing that Alwyn, awed and startled, remained for a moment mute—then, lifting his head proudly, answered—

“Yes, I *dare!* If I am immortal I will test my immortality! I will face God and find

these angels you talk about! What shall prevent me?"

"Find the angels!" Heliobas surveyed him sadly as he spoke. "Nay! . . . pray rather that they may find *thee!*" He looked long and steadfastly at Alwyn's countenance, on which there was just then the faint glimmer of a rather mocking smile,—and as he looked, his own face darkened suddenly into an expression of vague trouble and uneasiness—and a strange quiver passed visibly through him from head to foot.

"You are bold, Mr. Alwyn,"—he said at last, moving a little away from his guest and speaking with some apparent effort—"bold to a fault, but at the same time you are ignorant of all that lies behind the veil of the Unseen. I should be much to blame if I sent you hence to-night, utterly unguided—utterly uninstructed. I myself must think . . . and pray . . . before I venture to incur so terrible a responsibility. To-morrow perhaps—to-night, no! I cannot—moreover I will not!"

Alwyn flushed hotly with anger. "Trickster!" he thought. "He feels he has no power over me, and he fears to run the risk of failure!" . . .

"Did I hear you aright?" he said aloud in cold determined accents. "You cannot? . . . you will not? . . . By Heaven!"—and his voice rose,

“ I say you *shall!* ” As he uttered these words a rush of indescribable sensations overcame him,—he seemed all at once invested with some mysterious, invincible, supreme authority,—he felt twice a man and more than half a god, and moved by an irresistible impulse which he could neither explain nor control, he made two or three hasty steps forward... when Heliobas swiftly retreating, waved him off with an eloquent gesture of mingled appeal and menace.

“ Back! back! ” he cried warningly. “ If you come one inch nearer to me I cannot answer for your safety—back, I say! “ Good God! you do not know your *own* power! ”

Alwyn scarcely heeded him,—some fatal attraction drew him on, and he still advanced, when all suddenly he paused, trembling violently. His nerves began to throb acutely,—the blood in his veins was like fire,—there was a curious strangling tightness in his throat that interrupted and oppressed his breathing,—he stared straight before him with large, luminous, impassioned eyes. What—*what* was that dazzling something in the air that flashed and whirled and shone like glittering wheels of golden flame? His lips parted... he stretched out his hands in the uncertain manner of a blind man feeling his way... “ Oh God!... God! ” ... he muttered

as though stricken by some sudden amazement . . . then, with a smothered gasping cry, he staggered and fell heavily forward on the floor . . . insensible !

At the self-same instant the window blew open with a loud crash . . . it swung backwards and forwards on its hinges, and a torrent of rain poured through it slantwise into the room. A remarkable change had taken place in the aspect and bearing of Heliobas,—he stood as though rooted to the spot, trembling from head to foot,—he had lost all his usual composure,—he was deathly pale, and breathed with difficulty. Presently recovering himself a little he strove to shut the swinging casement, but the wind was so boisterous, that he had to pause a moment to gain strength for the effort, and instinctively he glanced out at the tempestuous night. The clouds were scurrying over the sky like great black vessels on a foaming sea,—the lightning flashed incessantly, and the thunder reverberated over the mountains in tremendous volleys as of besieging cannon. Stinging drops of icy sleet dashed his face and the front of his white garb as he inhaled the stormy freshness of the strong upward-sweeping blast for a few seconds—and then, with the air of one gathering together all

his scattered forces, he shut to the window firmly and barred it across. Turning now to the unconscious Alwyn, he lifted him from the floor to a low couch near at hand, and there laid him gently down. This done, he stood looking at him with an expression of the deepest anxiety, but made no attempt to rouse him from his death-like swoon. His own habitual serenity was completely broken through,—he had all the appearance of having received some unexpected and overwhelming shock,—his very lips were blanched and quivered nervously.

He waited for several minutes, attentively watching the recumbent figure before him, till gradually,—very gradually,—that figure took upon itself the pale, stern beauty of a corpse from which life has but recently and painlessly departed. The limbs grew stiff and rigid—the features smoothed into that mysteriously wise placidity which is so often seen in the faces of the dead,—the closed eyelids looked purple and livid as though bruised . . . there was not a breath, not a tremor, to offer any outward suggestion of returning animation,—and when, after some little time, Heliobas bent down and listened, there was no pulsation of the heart . . . it had ceased to beat! To all appear-

ances Alwyn was *dead*—any physician would have certified the fact, though how he had come by his death there was no evidence to show. And in that condition, . . . stirless, breathless . . . white as marble, cold and inanimate as stone, Heliobas left him. Not in indifference, but in sure knowledge—knowledge far beyond all mere medical science—that the senseless clay would in due time again arise to life and motion ; . . . that the casket was but temporarily bereft of its jewel,—and that the jewel itself, the Soul of the Poet, had by a superhuman access of will, managed to break its bonds and escape elsewhere. But whither? . . . Into what vast realms of translucent light or drear shadow? . . . This was a question to which the mystic monk, gifted as he was with a powerful spiritual insight into “things unseen and eternal,” could find no satisfactory answer, and in his anxious perplexity he betook himself to the chapel, and there, by the red glimmer of the crimson Star that shone dimly above the altar, he knelt alone and prayed in silence till the heavy night had passed, and the storm had slain itself with the sword of its own fury on the dark slopes of the Pass of Dariel.



CHAPTER IV.

“ANGELUS DOMINE.”

THE next morning dawned pallidly over a sea of gray mist—not a glimpse of the landscape was visible—nothing but a shadowy vastness of floating vapour that moved slowly, fold upon fold, wave upon wave, as though bent on blotting out the world. A very faint chill light peered through the narrow arched window of the room where Alwyn lay, still wrapped in that profound repose, so like the last long sleep from which some of our modern scientists tell us there can be no awakening. His condition was unchanged,—the wan beams of the early day falling across his features intensified their waxen stillness and pallor,—the awful majesty of death was on him,—the pathetic helplessness and perishableness of Body without Spirit. Presently the monastery bell began to ring for matins, and as its clear

chime struck through the deep silence, the door opened, and Heliobas, accompanied by another monk, whose gentle countenance and fine soft eyes betokened the serenity of his disposition, entered the apartment. Together they approached the couch, and gazed long and earnestly at the supernaturally slumbering man.

“He is still far away!” said Heliobas at last, sighing as he spoke. “So far away that my mind misgives me. . . . Alas, Hilarion! how limited is our knowledge! . . . even with all the spiritual aids of spiritual life how little can be accomplished! We learn one thing, and another presents itself—we conquer one difficulty, and another instantly springs up to obstruct our path. Now if I had only had the innate perception required to foresee the possible flight of this released Immortal creature, might I not have saved it from some incalculable misery and suffering?”

“I think not,” answered in rather musing accents the monk called Hilarion—“I think not. Such protection can never be exercised by mere human intelligence: if this soul is to be saved or shielded in its invisible journeyings, it will be by some means that not all the marvels of our science can calculate. You say he was without faith?”

“Entirely.”

“What was his leading principle?”

“A desire for what he called Truth,” replied Heliobas. “He, like many others of his class, never took the trouble to consider very deeply the inner meaning of Pilate’s famous question, ‘What *is* Truth?’ *We* know what it is, as generally accepted—a few so-called facts which in a thousand years will all be contradicted, mixed up with a few finite opinions propounded by unstable-minded men. In brief, Truth, according to the world, is simply whatever the world is pleased to consider as Truth for the time being. ’Tis a somewhat slight thing to stake one’s immortal destinies upon!”

Hilarion raised one of Alwyn’s cold, pulseless hands—it was stiff, and white as marble.

“I suppose,” he said, “there is no doubt of his returning hither?”

“None whatever,” answered Heliobas decisively. “His life on earth is assured for many years yet,—inasmuch as his penance is not finished, his recompense not won. Thus far my knowledge of his fate is certain.”

“Then you will bring him back to-day?” pursued Hilarion.

“Bring him back? I? I cannot!” said Heliobas, with a touch of sad humility in his

tone. "And for this very reason I feared to send him hence,—and would not have done so,—not without preparation at any rate,—could I have had my way. His departure was more strange than any I have ever known—moreover it was his own doing, not mine. I had positively refused to exert my influence upon him, because I felt he was not in my sphere, and that therefore neither I nor any of those higher intelligences with which I am in communication, could control or guide his wanderings. He, however, was as positively determined that I *should* exert it—and to this end he suddenly concentrated all the pent-up fire of his nature in one rapid effort of Will, and advanced upon me. . . I warned him, but in vain ! quick as lightning flash meets lightning flash, the two invisible Immortal Forces within us sprang into instant opposition,—with this difference, that while he was ignorant and unconscious of *his* power, I was cognisant and fully conscious of *mine*. Mine was focused, as it were, upon him,—his was untrained and scattered,—the result was that mine won the victory :—yet understand me well, Hilarion,—if I could have held myself in, I would have done so. It was he,—he who *drew* my force out of me as one would draw a sword out of its scabbard—the sword may be

ever so stiffly fixed in its sheath, but the strong hand will wrench it forth somehow, and use it for battle when needed.”

“Then,” said Hilarion wonderingly, “you admit this man possesses a power greater than your own?”

“Aye, if he knew it!” returned Heliobas, quietly. “But he does not know. Only an angel could teach him—and in angels he does not believe.”

“He may believe now . . . ?”

“He may. He will—he must, . . . if he has gone where I would have him go.”

“A poet, is he not?” queried Hilarion softly, bending down to look more attentively at the beautiful Antinous-like face, colourless and cold as sculptured alabaster.

“An uncrowned monarch of a world of song!” responded Heliobas, with a tender inflection in his rich voice. “A genius such as the earth sees but once in a century! But he has been smitten with the disease of unbelief and deprived of hope,—and where there is no hope there is no lasting accomplishment.” He paused, and with a touch as gentle as a woman’s, rearranged the cushions under Alwyn’s heavy head, and laid his hand in grave benediction on the broad white brow shaded by its clustering

waves of dark hair. "May the Infinite Love bring him out of danger into peace and safety!" he said solemnly,—then turning away, he took his companion by the arm, and they both left the room, closing the door quietly behind them. The chapel bell went on tolling slowly, slowly, sending muffled echoes through the fog for some minutes—then it ceased, and a profound stillness reigned.

The monastery was always a very silent habitation, — situated as it was on so lofty and barren a crag, it was far beyond the singing-reach of the smaller sweet-throated birds — now and then an eagle clove the mist with a whirr of wings and a discordant scream on his way towards some distant mountain eyrie—but no other sound of awakening life broke the hush of the slowly-widening dawn. An hour passed—and Alwyn still remained in the same position,—as pallidly quiescent as a corpse stretched out for burial. By and by a change began to thrill mysteriously through the atmosphere, like the flowing of amber wine through crystal—the heavy vapours shuddered together as though suddenly lashed by a whip of flame,—they rose, swayed to and fro, and parted asunder . . . then, dissolving into thin milk-white veils of fleecy film, they floated

“ANGELUS DOMINE.”

away, disclosing as they vanished, the giant summits of the encircling mountains, that lifted themselves to the light one above another in the form of frozen billows. Over these a delicate pink flush flitted in tremulous wavy lines—long arrows of gold began to pierce the tender shimmering blue of the sky—soft puffs of cloud tinged with vivid crimson and pale green were strewn along the eastern horizon like flowers in the path of an advancing hero,—and then all at once there was a slight cessation of movement in the heavens—an attentive pause as though the whole universe waited for some great splendour as yet unrevealed. That splendour came : in a red blaze of triumph the Sun rose, pouring a shower of beamy brilliancy over the white vastness of the heights covered with perpetual snow,—jagged peaks, sharp as scimitars and sparkling with ice, caught fire, and seemed to melt away in an absorbing sea of radiance, . . . the waiting clouds moved on, redecked in deeper hues of royal purple—and the full Morning glory was declared. As the dazzling effulgence streamed through the window and flooded the couch where Alwyn lay, a faint tinge of colour returned to his face,—his lips moved,—his broad chest heaved with struggling sighs—his eyelids

quivered,—and his before rigid hands relaxed,—and folded themselves together in an attitude of peace and prayer. Like a statue becoming slowly and magically flushed with life, the warm hues of the naturally flowing blood deepened through the whiteness of his skin,—his breathing grew more and more easy and regular,—his features gradually assumed their wonted appearance, and presently . . . without any violent start or exclamation . . . he awoke ! But was it a real awakening ?—or rather a continuation of some strange impression received in slumber ?

He rose to his feet, pushing back the hair from his brow with an entranced look of listening wonderment—his eyes were humid yet brilliant—his whole aspect was that of one inspired. He paced once or twice up and down the room, but he was evidently unconscious of his surroundings—he seemed possessed by thoughts which absorbed his whole being. Presently he seated himself at the table, and absently fingering the writing materials that were upon it, he appeared meditatively to question their use and meaning. Then, drawing several sheets of paper towards him, he began to write with extraordinary rapidity and eagerness—his pen travelled on smoothly, uninterrupted by blot or erasure. Sometimes he paused—but when

he did it was always with an upraised, attentively-listening expression. Once he murmured aloud, “ARDATH! Nay, I shall not forget!—we will meet at *Ardath!*” and again he resumed his occupation. Page after page he covered with close writing—no weak, uncertain scrawl, but a firm, bold, neat caligraphy,—his own peculiar characteristic hand. The sun mounted higher and higher in the heavens, . . . hour after hour passed, and still he wrote on, apparently unaware of the flitting time. At mid-day the bell, which had not rung since early dawn, began to swing quickly to and fro in the chapel turret,—the deep bass of the organ breathed on the silence a thunderous monotone, and a bee-like murmur of distant voices proclaimed the words: “*Angelus Domine nuntiavit Mariæ.*”

At the first sound of this chant, the spell that enchained Alwyn’s mind was broken,—drawing a quick dashing line under what he had written, he sprang up erect and dropped his pen.

“Heliobas!” he cried loudly, “Heliobas! *Where is the field of Ardath?*”

His voice seemed strange and unfamiliar to his own ears,—he waited, listening, and the chanting went on—“*Et Verbo caro factus est, et habitavit in nobis.*”

Suddenly, as if he could endure his solitude no longer, he rushed to the door and threw it open, thereby nearly flinging himself against Heliobas, who was entering the room at the same moment. He drew back, . . . stared wildly, and passing his hand across his forehead confusedly, forced a laugh.

“I have been dreaming!” he said, . . . then with a passionate gesture he added, “God! if the dream were true!”

He was strongly excited, and Heliobas, slipping one arm round him in a friendly manner, led him back to the chair he had vacated, observing him closely as he did so.

“You call *this* dreaming?” he inquired with a slight smile, pointing to the table strewn with manuscript on which the ink was not yet dry. “Then dreams are more productive than active exertion! Here is goodly matter for printers! . . . a fair result it seems of one morning’s labour!”

Alwyn started up, seized the written sheets and scanned them eagerly.

“It is my handwriting!” he muttered in a tone of stupefied amazement.

“Of course! Whose handwriting should it be?” returned Heliobas, watching him with scientifically keen, yet kindly interest.

“ANGELUS DOMINE.”

“Then it *is* true!” he exclaimed. “True—by the sweetness of her eyes,—true by the love-lit radiance of her smile!—true, O thou God whom I dared to doubt! true by the marvels of Thy matchless wisdom!”

And with this strange outburst, he began to read in feverish haste what he had written. His breath came and went quickly,—his cheeks flushed, his eyes dilated,—line after line he perused with apparent wonder and rapture,—when suddenly interrupting himself he raised his head and recited in a half whisper :

*“With thundering notes of song sublime
I cast my sins away from me,—
On stairs of sound I mount—I climb!
The angels wait and pray for me!”*

“I heard that stanza somewhere when I was a boy, . . . why do I think of it now? *She* has waited,—so she said,—these many thousand days!”

He paused meditatively,—and then resumed his reading. Heliobas touched his arm.

“It will take you some time to read that, Mr. Alwyn,” he gently observed. “You have written more than you know.”

Alwyn roused himself and looked straight at the speaker. Putting down his manuscript and resting one hand upon it, he gazed with an

air of solemn inquiry into the noble face turned steadfastly towards his own.

“Tell me,” he said wistfully, “how has it happened? This composition is mine and yet not mine. For it is a grand and perfect poem of which I dare not call myself the author! I might as well snatch *Her* crown of starry flowers and call myself an Angel!”

He spoke with mingled fervour and humility. To any ordinary observer he would have seemed to be labouring under some strange hallucination, —but Heliobas was more deeply instructed.

“Come, come! . . . your thoughts are wide of this world,” he said kindly. “Try to recall them! I can tell you nothing, for I know nothing . . . you have been absent many hours.”

“Absent? yes!” and Alwyn’s voice thrilled with an infinite regret. “Absent from earth . . . ah! would to God I might have stayed with her, in Heaven! My love, my love! . . . where shall find her if not on the *field of Ardath?*”





CHAPTER V.

A MYSTIC TRYST.

As he uttered the last words, his eyes darkened into a soft expression of musing tenderness, and he remained silent for many minutes, during which the entranced almost unearthly beauty of his face underwent a gradual change... the mystic light that had for a time transfigured it, faded and died away—and by degrees he recovered all his ordinary self-possession. Presently glancing at Heliobas who stood patiently waiting till he should have overcome whatever emotions were at work in his mind, he smiled.

“You must think me mad!” he said. “Perhaps I am,—but if so, it is the madness of love that has seized me. Love!.. it is a passion I have never known before.. I have used it as a mere thread whereon to string madrigals.. a background of uncertain tint serving to show off the brighter hues of Poesy—but now!.. now

ARDATH.

I am enslaved and bound, conquered and utterly subdued by love! . . . love for the sweetest, queenliest, most radiant creature that ever captured or commanded the worship of man! I may *seem* mad—but I know I am sane—I realize the actual things of this world about me—my mind is clear, my thoughts are collected, and yet I repeat, I *love!* . . . aye! with all the force and fervour of this strongly beating human heart of mine;”—and he touched his breast as he spoke, “And it comes to this, most wise and worthy Heliobas,—if your spells have conjured up this vision of immortal youth and grace and purity that has suddenly assumed such sovereignty over my life—then you must do something further, . . . you must find, or teach me *how* to find, the living Reality of my Dream!”

Heliobas surveyed him with some wonder and commiseration.

“A moment ago and you yourself declared your *dream* was true!” he observed. “This,” and he pointed to the manuscript on the table, “seemed to you sufficient to prove it. Now you have altered your opinion: . . . why? I have worked no spells upon you, and I am entirely ignorant as to what your recent experience has been. Moreover, what do you mean by a ‘living Reality’? The flesh and blood, bone

and substance that perishes in a brief seventy years or so and crumbles into indistinguishable dust? Surely, . . . if, as I conjecture from your words you have seen one of the fair inhabitants of higher spheres than ours, . . . you would not drag her spiritual and death-unconscious brightness down to the level of the 'reality' of a merely human life? Nay, if you would, you could not!"

Alwyn looked at him inquiringly and with a perplexed air.

"You speak in enigmas," he said somewhat vexedly. "However, the whole thing is an enigma and would puzzle the most sagacious head. That the physical workings of the brain in a state of trance, should arouse in me a passion of love for an imaginary being, and, at the same time, enable me to write a poem such as must make the fame of any man, is certainly a remarkable and noteworthy result of scientific mesmerism!"

"Now my dear sir," interrupted Heliobas in a tone of good-natured remonstrance,—“do not—if you have any respect for science at all—do not, I beg of you talk to me of the 'physical workings' of a *dead brain!*”

"A dead brain!" echoed Alwyn. "What do you mean?"

“What I say,” returned Heliobas, composedly. “‘Physical workings’ of any kind are impossible unless the motive power of physical life be in action. You, regarded as a *human* creature merely, had during several hours practically *ceased to be*,—the vital principle no longer existed in your body, having taken its departure together with its inseparable companion, the Soul. When it returned, it set the clockwork of your material mechanism in motion again, obeying the sovereignty of the Spirit that sought to express by material means, the utterance of heaven-inspired thought. Thus your hand mechanically found its way to the pen—thus you wrote, unconscious of what you were writing, yielding yourself entirely to the guidance of the spiritual part of your nature, which *at that particular juncture* was absolutely predominant, though now weighted anew by earthy influences it has partially relaxed its supernal sway. All this I readily perceive and understand...but what you did, and where you were conducted during the time of your complete severance from the tenement of clay in which you are again imprisoned,this I have yet to learn.”

While Heliobas was speaking, Alwyn's

countenance had grown vaguely troubled, and now into his deep poetic eyes there came a look of sudden penitence.

“ True!” he said softly, almost humbly, “ I will tell you everything while I remember it,—though it is not likely I shall ever forget! I believe there must be some truth after all in what you say concerning the Soul,... at any rate, I do not at present feel inclined to call your theories in question. To begin with, I find myself unable altogether to explain what it was that happened to me during my conversation with you last night. It was a very strange sensation! I recollect that I had expressed a wish to be placed under your magnetic or electric influence, and that you had refused my request. Then an odd idea suggested itself to me—namely, that I could if I chose *compel* your assent, . —and, filled with this notion, I think I addressed you, or was about to address you in a rather peremptory manner, when—all at once—a flash of blinding light struck me fiercely across the eyes like a scourge!—. Stung with the hot pain, and dazzled by the glare I turned away from you and fled ... or so it seemed—fled on my own instinctive impulse ... into *darkness!*”

He paused and drew a long shuddering

breath, like one who has narrowly escaped imminent destruction.

“Darkness!” he went on in low accents that thrilled with the memory of a past fear—“dense, horrible, frightful darkness!—darkness that palpitated heavily with the laboured motion of unseen things!—darkness that clung and closed about me in masses of clammy, tangible thickness,—its advancing and resistless weight rolled over me like a huge waveless ocean,—and, absorbed within it, I was drawn down—down—down towards some hidden impalpable but All-Supreme Agony, the dull unceasing throbs of which I felt, yet could not name. ‘*O God!*’ I cried aloud, abandoning myself to wild despair, ‘*O God! Where art Thou?*’ Then I heard a great rushing sound as of a strong wind beaten through with wings, and a Voice, grand and sweet as a golden trumpet blown suddenly in the silence of night, answered, ‘*Here! . . . and Everywhere!*’ With that, a slanting stream of opaline radiance cleft the gloom with the sweep of a sword-blade, and I was caught up quickly . . . I know not how . . . for I saw nothing!”

Again he paused and looked wistfully at Heliobas, who in turn regarded him with gentle steadfastness.

A MYSTIC TRYST.

“It was wonderful—terrible!” . . . he continued slowly—“yet beautiful! . . . that Invisible Strength that rescued, surrounded, and uplifted me; and—” Here he hesitated, and a faint flush coloured his cheeks and stole up to the roots of his clustering hair—“dream or no dream, I feel I cannot now altogether reject the idea of an existing Divinity. In brief . . . I believe in God!”

“Why?” asked Heliobas quietly.

Alwyn met his gaze frankly and with a soft brightening of his handsome features.

“I cannot give you any logical reasons,” he said. “Moreover, logical reasoning would not now affect me in a matter which seems to me more full of conviction than any logic. I believe, . . . simply because I believe!”

Heliobas smiled—a very warm and kindly smile—but said nothing, and Alwyn resumed his narrative.

“As I tell you, I was caught up,—snatched out of that black profundity with inconceivable swiftness,—and when the ascending movement ceased, I found myself floating lightly like a wind-blown leaf through twining arches of amber mist, coloured here and there with rays of living flame . . . I heard whispers, and fragments of song and speech, all sweeter than the sweetest of our known music, . . . and still I saw

nothing. Presently some one called me by name—‘*Theos! . . . Theos!*’ I strove to answer, but I had no words wherewith to match that silver-toned, far-reaching utterance; and once again the rich vibrating notes pealed through the vaporous fire-tinted air—‘*Theos, my Beloved! Higher! . . . higher!*’ . . . All my being thrilled and quivered to that call . . . I yearned to obey . . . I struggled to rise—my efforts were in vain; . . .—when, to my joy and wonder, a small, invisible hand, delicate yet strong, clasped mine, and I was borne aloft with breathless indescribable, lightning-like rapidity—on . . . on . . . and ever upward, till at last, alighting on a smooth, fair turf, thick-grown with fragrant blossoms of strange loveliness and soft hues, I beheld Her! . . . and she bade me welcome!”

“And who,” questioned Heliobas, in tones of hushed reverence, “who was this Being that thus enchants your memory?”

“I know not!” replied Alwyn, with a dreamy smile of rapture on his lips and in his eyes, “And yet her face . . . oh! the entrancing beauty of that face! . . . was not altogether unfamiliar. I felt that I must have loved and lost her ages upon ages ago! Crowned with white flowers, and robed in a garb that seemed spun from midsummer moonbeams, she stood . . . a smiling

Maiden-Sweetness in a paradise of glad sights and sounds, . . . ah! Eve, with the first sunrise radiance on her brows was not more divinely fair! . . . Venus, new-springing from the silver sea-foam was not more queenly-glorious! ‘*I will remind thee of all thou hast forgotten,*’ she said, and I understood her soft, half-reproachful accents. ‘*It is not yet too late! Thou hast lost much and suffered much, and thou hast blindly erred, but notwithstanding all these things, thou art my Beloved since these many thousand days!*’”

“Days—which the world counts as years!” murmured Heliobas. “You saw no one but her?”

“No one—we were alone together. A vast woodland stretched before us, . . . she took my hand and led me beneath broad-arching trees to where a lake, silvered by some strange radiance, glittered diamond-like in the stirrings of a balmy wind. Here she bade me rest—and sank gently on the flowery bank beside me. Then viewing her more closely I greatly feared her beauty—for I saw a wondrous halo wide and dazzling—a golden aureole that spread itself around her in scintillating points of light—light that reflected itself also on me and bathed me in its luminous splendour. And

as I gazed at her in speechless awe, she leaned towards me nearer and nearer, her deep pure eyes burning softly into mine . . . her hands touched me—her arms closed round me . . . her bright head lay in all its shining loveliness on my breast! A tremulous ecstasy thrilled me as with fire . . . I gazed upon her as one might gaze on some fluttering rare-plumaged bird . . . I dared not move or speak . . . I drank her sweetness down into my soul! Now and then a sound as of distant harps playing broke the love-weighted silence . . . and thus we remained together a heavenly breathing-space of wordless rapture ;—till suddenly and swiftly, as though she had received an invisible summons, she arose, her looks expressing a saintly patience, and laying her two hands upon my brows—‘Write,’ she said, ‘*Write and proclaim a message of hope to the Sorrowful Star! Write and let thine utterance be a true echo of the eternal music with which these spheres are filled! Write to the rhythmic beat of the harmonies within thee . . . for lo! once more as in aforetime my changeless love renews in thee the power of perfect song!*’ With that she moved away serenely and beckoned me to follow . . . I obeyed in haste and trembling . . . long rays of rosy light swept after her like trailing wings, and as she walked, the

A MYSTIC TRYST.

golden nimbus round her form glowed with a thousand brilliant and changeful hues like the rainbows seen in the spray of falling water! Through lush green grass thick with blossom,—under groves heavy with fragrant leaves and laden with the songs of birds.. over meadows cool and mountain-sheltered, on we went—she, like the goddess of advancing Spring, I eagerly treading in her radiant footsteps, .. and presently we came to a place where two paths met, .. one all over-grown with azure and white flowers, that ascended away and away into undiscerned distance, ... the other sloping steeply downwards and full of shadows, yet dimly illumined by a pale mysterious splendour like frosty moonlight streaming on sad-coloured seas. Here she turned and faced me, and I saw her divine eyes droop with the moisture of unshed tears. ‘*Theos!.. Theos!*’.. she cried, and the passionate cadence of her voice was as the singing of a nightingale in lonely woodlands... ‘*Again.. again we must part!... Part! .. oh, my Beloved! .. my Beloved! .. How long wilt thou sever me from thy soul and leave me alone and sorrowful amid the joys of Heaven?*’ As she thus spoke a sense of utter shame and loss and failure overwhelmed me, .. pierced to the very core of my being by an unexplained

yet most bitter remorse, I cast myself down in deep abasement before her, . . . I caught her glittering robe . . . I strove to say 'Forgive!' but I was speechless as a convicted traitor in the presence of a wronged queen! All at once the air about us was rent by a great noise of thunder intermingled with triumphal music,—she drew her sheeny garment from my touch in haste, and stooping to me where I knelt she kissed my forehead. . . ' *Thy road lies there* '—she murmured in quick soft tones, pointing to the vista of varying light and shadow,—' *mine, yonder!* ' and she looked towards the flower-garlanded avenue—' *Hasten! . . . it is time thou wert far hence! return to thine own Star, lest its portals be closed on thee for ever and thou be plunged into deeper darkness! Seek thou the FIELD OF ARDATH!—as Christ lives, I will meet thee there! Farewell!* ' With these words she left me, passing away, arrayed in glory, treading on flowers, and ever ascending till she disappeared! . . . while I, stricken with a great repentance, went slowly, as she bade me, down into the shadow, and a rippling breeze-like melody, as of harps and lutes most tenderly attuned, followed me as I descended. And now," said Alwyn interrupting his narrative and speaking with emphatic decision, "surely

there remains but one thing for me to do—that is, to find the ‘*Field of Ardath.*’”

Heliobas smiled gravely. “Nay, if you consider the whole episode a dream,” he observed, “why trouble yourself? Dreams are seldom realised, . . . and as to the name of *Ardath*, have you ever heard it before?”

“Never!” replied Alwyn. “Still—if there *is* such a place on this planet I will most certainly journey thither! Maybe *you* know something of its whereabouts?”

“Finish your story,” said Heliobas, quietly evading the question. “I am curious to hear the end of your strange adventure.”

“There is not much more to tell,” and Alwyn sighed a little as he spoke. “I wandered further and further into the gloom, oppressed by many thoughts and troubled by vague fears, till presently it grew so dark that I could scarcely see where I was going, though I was able to guide myself in the path that stretched before me by means of the pale luminous rays that frequently pierced the deepening obscurity, and these rays I now noticed fell ever downwards in the form of a Cross. As I went on I was pursued as it were by the sound of those delicate harmonies played on invisible sweet strings; and after a while I perceived at the

extreme end of the long dim vista a door standing open, through which I entered and found myself alone in a quiet room. Here I sat down to rest,—the melody of the distant harps and lutes still floated in soft echoes on the silence...and presently words came breaking through the music, like buds breaking from their surrounding leaves.. words that I was compelled to write down as quickly as I heard them...and I wrote on and on, obeying that symphonious and rhythmical dictation with a sense of growing ease and pleasure,... when all suddenly a dense darkness overcame me, followed by a gradual dawning grey and golden light.. the words dispersed into fragmentary half-syllables .. the music died away, .. I started up amazed.. to find myself here!.... here in this monastery of Lars, listening to the chanting of the Angelus!”

He ceased, and looked wistfully out through the window at the white encircling rim of the opposite snow - mountains, now bathed in the full splendour of noon. Heliobas advanced and laid one hand kindly on his shoulder....

“And do not forget,” he said, “that you have brought with you from the higher regions a Poem that will in all probability make your

fame! ‘Fame! fame! next grandest word to God!’...so wrote one of your craft, and no doubt you echo the sentiment! Have you not desired to blazon your name on the open scroll of the world? Well!..now you can have your wish—the world waits to receive your signature!”

“That is all very well!” and Alwyn smiled rather dubiously as he glanced at the manuscript on the table beside him. “But the question is,—considering how it was written,—can I, dare I call this poem *mine*?”

“Most assuredly you can,” returned Heliobas. “Though your hesitation is a worthy one, and as rare as it is worthy. Well would it be for all poets and artists were they to pause thus, and consider before rashly calling their work their own! Self-appreciation is the death-blow of genius. The poem is as much yours as your life is yours—no more and no less. In brief, you have recovered your lost inspiration; the lately dumb oracle speaks again :—and are you not satisfied?”

“No!” said Alwyn quickly, with a sudden brightening of his eyes as he met the keenly searching glance that accompanied this question. “No! for I love!...and the desire of love burns in me as ardently as the desire of fame!”

He paused, and in quieter tones continued, "You see I speak freely and frankly to you as though—," and he laughed a little, "as though I were a good Catholic, and you my father-confessor! Good heavens! if some of the men I know in London were to hear me, they would think me utterly crazed! But craze or no craze, I feel I shall never be satisfied now till I find out whether there *is* anywhere in the world a place called *Ardath*. Can you, will you help me in the search? I am almost ashamed to ask you, for you have already done so much for me, and I really owe to your wonderful power my trance or soul-liberty, or whatever it may be called,"

"You owe me nothing," interposed Heliobas calmly, "not even thanks. Your own will accomplished your freedom, and I am not responsible for either your departure or your return. It was a pre-destined occurrence, yet perfectly scientific and easy of explanation. Your inward force attracted mine down upon you in one strong current, with the result that your Spirit instantly parted asunder from your Body, and in that released condition you experienced what you have described. But *I* had no more to do with that experience than I shall have with your journey

to the 'field of Ardath,' should you decide to go there."

"There *is* an Ardath then!" cried Alwyn excitedly.

Heliobas eyed him with something of scorn. "Naturally! Are you still so much of a sceptic that you think an *Angel* would have bidden you seek a place that had no existence? Oh, yes! I see you are inclined to treat your ethereal adventure as a mere dream,—but *I* know it was a reality, more real than anything in this present world." And turning to the loaded bookshelves he took down a large volume, and spread it open on the table.

"You know this book?" he asked.

Alwyn glanced at it. "The Bible! Of course!" he replied indifferently. "Everybody knows it!"

"Pardon!" and Heliobas smiled. "It would be more correct to say nobody knows it. To read is not always to understand. There are meanings and mysteries in it which have never yet been penetrated, and which only the highest and most spiritually gifted intellects can ever hope to unravel. Now" . . . and he turned over the pages carefully till he came to the one he sought, "I think there is something here that will interest you—listen!" and he read aloud,

“The Angel Uriel came unto me and said : Go into a field of flowers where no house is builded and eat only the flowers of the field—taste no flesh, drink no wine, but eat flowers only. And pray unto the Highest continually, and then will I come and talk to thee. So I went my way into the field which is called ARDATH,”

“The very place!” exclaimed Alwyn, eagerly bending over the sacred book; then drawing back with a gesture of disappointment he added, “But you are reading from Esdras, the Apocrypha! an utterly unreliable source of information!”

“On the contrary, as reliable as any history ever written,” rejoined Heliobas calmly. “Study it for yourself, . . . you will see that the prophet was at that time resident in Babylon; the field he mentions was near the city . . .”

“Yes—*was!*” interrupted Alwyn incredulously.

“Was and *is,*” continued Heliobas. “No earthquake has crumbled it, no sea has invaded it, and no house has been ‘builded’ thereon. It is, as it was then, a waste field lying about four miles west of the Babylonian ruins, and there is nothing whatever to hinder you from journeying thither when you please.”

Alwyn's expression as he heard this was one of stupefied amazement. Part of his so-called "dream" had already proved itself true—a "field of Ardath" actually existed!

"You are certain of what you say?" he demanded.

"Positively certain!" returned Heliobas.

There was a silence, during which a little tinkling bell resounded in the outer corridor, followed by the tread of sandalled feet on the stone pavement. Heliobas closed the Bible and returned it to its shelf.

"That was the dinner-bell," he announced cheerfully. "Will you accompany me to the refectory, Mr. Alwyn? . . . we can talk further of this matter afterwards."

Alwyn roused himself from the fit of abstraction into which he had fallen, and gathering together the loose sheets of his so strangely written manuscript, he arranged them all in an orderly heap without speaking. Then he looked up and met the earnest eyes of Heliobas with an expression of settled resolve in his own.

"I shall set out for Babylon to-morrow," he said quietly. "As well go there as anywhere! . . . and on the result of my journey I shall stake my future! In the meantime——" He

hesitated, then suddenly extending his hand with a frank grace that became him well, "In spite of my *brusquerie* last night, I trust we are friends?"

"Why, most assuredly we are!" returned Heliobas, heartily pressing the proffered palm. "You had your doubts of me and you have them still; but what of that! I take no offence at unbelief. I pity those who suffer from its destroying influence too profoundly to find room in my heart for anger. Moreover, I never try to convert anybody....it is so much more satisfactory when sceptics convert themselves, as you are unconsciously doing! Come, . . . shall we join the brethren?"

Over Alwyn's face flitted a transient shade of uneasiness and *hauteur*.

"I would rather they knew nothing about all this," he began.

"Make your mind quite easy on that score," rejoined Heliobas. "None of my companions here are aware of your recent departure, except my very old personal friend Hilarion, who, with myself, saw your body while in its state of temporary death. But he is one of those remarkably rare wise men who know when it is best to be silent; then again, he is ignorant as to the results of your soul

A MYSTIC TRYST.

transmigration, and will, as far as I am concerned, remain in ignorance. Your confidence I assure you is perfectly safe with me—as safe as though it had been received under the sacred seal of confession.”

With this understanding Alwyn seemed relieved and satisfied, and thereupon they left the apartment together.





CHAPTER VI.

“NOURHÀLMA” AND THE ORIGINAL ESDRAS.

LATER on in the afternoon of the same day, when the sun, poised above the western mountain-range, appeared to be lazily looking about him with a drowsy golden smile of farewell before descending to his rest, Alwyn was once more alone in the library. Twilight shadows were already gathering in the corners of the long low room, but he had moved the writing table to the window, in order to enjoy the magnificence of the surrounding scenery, and sat where the light fell full upon his face as he leaned back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, in an attitude of pleased half-meditative indolence. He had just finished reading from beginning to end the poem he had composed in his trance.. there was not a line in it he could have wished

altered,—not a word that would have been better omitted,—the only thing it lacked was a title, and this was the question on which he now pondered. The subject of the Poem itself was not new to him—it was a story he had known from boyhood, .. an old Eastern love-legend fantastically beautiful as many such legends are, full of grace and passionate fervour,—a theme fitted for the nightingale-utterance of a singer like the Persian Hafiz,—though even Hafiz would have found it difficult to match the exquisitely choice language and delicately ringing rhythm in which this quaint idyll of long past ages was now most perfectly set like a jewel in fine gold. Alwyn himself entirely realized the splendid literary value of the composition,—he knew that nothing more artistic in conception or more finished in treatment had appeared since the *St. Agnes Eve* of Keats,—and as he thought of this, he yielded to a growing sense of self-complacent satisfaction which gradually destroyed all the deeply devout humility he had at first felt concerning the high and mysterious origin of his inspiration. The old inherent pride of his nature re-asserted itself—he reviewed all the circumstances of his “trance” in the most practical manner—and calling to mind how

the poet Coleridge had improvised the delicious fragment of *Kubla Khan* in a dream, he began to see nothing so very remarkable in his own unconscious production of a complete poem while under mesmeric or magnetic influences.

“After all,” he mused, “the matter is simple enough, when one reasons it out. I have been unable to write anything worth writing for a long time, and I told Heliobas as much. He, knowing my apathetic condition of brain, employed his force accordingly, though he denies having done so, . . . and this poem is evidently the result of my own long pent-up thoughts that struggled for utterance, yet could not before find vent in words. The only mysterious part of the affair is this ‘Field of Ardath,’ . . . how its name haunts me! . . . and how *her* face shines before the eyes of my memory! That *she* should be a phantom of my own creation seems impossible—for when have I, even in my wildest freaks of fancy, ever imagined a creature half so fair!”

His gaze rested dreamily on the opposite snow-clad peaks, above which large fleecy clouds, themselves like moving mountains, were slowly passing, their edges glowing with purple and gold as they neared the sinking

sun. Presently rousing himself, he took up a pen and first of all addressing an envelope to

“THE HONBLE. FRANCIS VILLIERS,
Constitutional Club,
London,”

he rapidly wrote off the following letter —

“MONASTERY OF LARS,
“PASS OF DARIEL, CAUCASUS.

“MY DEAR VILLIERS,—Start not at the above address! I am not yet vowed to perpetual seclusion, silence or celibacy! That I of all men in the world should be in a Monastery will seem to you, who know my prejudices, in the last degree absurd—nevertheless here I am,—though here I do not remain, as it is my fixed intention to-morrow at daybreak to depart straightway from hence *en route* for the supposed site and ruins of Babylon. Yes,—Babylon! why not? Perished greatness has always been a more interesting subject of contemplation to me than existing littleness—and I dare say I shall wander among the *tumuli* of the ancient fallen city with more satisfaction than in the hot humanity-packed streets of London, Paris, or Vienna—all destined to become *tumuli* in their turn. Moreover I am on the track of an adventure,—on the search for a new sensa-

tion, having tried nearly all the old ones and found them *nil*. You know my nomadic and restless disposition . . . perhaps there is something of the Greek gipsy about me—a craving for constant change of scene and surroundings,—however as my absence from you and England is likely to be somewhat prolonged, I send you in the meantime a Poem—there! ‘Season your admiration for a while’ and hear me out patiently. I am perfectly aware of all you would say concerning the utter folly and uselessness of writing poetry at all in this present age of milk-and-watery literature, shilling sensationals, and lascivious society dramas,—and I have a very keen recollection too of the way in which my last book was maltreated by the entire press—good heavens! how the critics yelped like dogs about my heels, snapping, sniffing and snarling! I could have wept then like the sensitive fool I was I can laugh now! In brief, my friend—for you *are* my friend and the best of all possible good fellows—I have made up my mind to conquer those that have risen against me—to break through the ranks of pedantic and pre-conceived opinions—and to climb the heights of fame, regardless of the little popular pipers of tame verse that obstruct my path and blow their tin whistles

in the public ears to drown, if possible, my song. I WILL be heard! . . . and to this end I pin my faith on the work I now transmit to your care. Have it published immediately and in the best style—I will cover all expenses. Advertise sufficiently, yet with becoming modesty, for ‘puffery’ is a thing I heartily despise,—and were the whole press to turn round and applaud me as much as it has hitherto abused and ridiculed me, I would not have one of its penny lines of condescendingly ignorant approval quoted in connection with what must be a perfectly unostentatious and simple announcement of this new production from my pen. The manuscript is exceptionally clear, even for me who do not as a rule write a very bad scrawl—so that you can scarcely have much bother with the proof-correcting—though even were this the case, and the printers turned out to be incorrigible blockheads and blunderers, I know you would grudge neither time nor trouble expended in my service. Good Frank Villiers! how much I owe you!—and yet I willingly incur another debt of gratitude by placing this matter in your hands, and am content to borrow more of your friendship, but only, believe me in order to repay it again with the truest interest! By the way, do you

remember when we visited the last Paris *Salon* together, how fascinated we were by one picture—the head of a monk whose eyes looked out like a veritable illumination from under the folds of a drooping white cowl? . . . and how on referring to our catalogues we found it described as the portrait of one ‘Heliobas’ an Eastern mystic, a psychist formerly well known in Paris, but since retired into monastic life? Well! I have discovered him *here*;—he is apparently the Superior or chief of this Order—though what Order it is and when founded is more than I can tell. There are fifteen monks altogether, living contentedly in this old half-ruined habitation among the barren steeps of the frozen Caucasus,—splendid, princely-looking fellows all of them, Heliobas himself being an exceptionally fine specimen of his race. I have just dined with the whole community, and have been fairly astonished by the fluent brilliancy and wit of their conversation. They speak all languages, English included, and no subject comes amiss to them, for they are familiar with the latest political situations in all countries,—they know all about the newest scientific discoveries (which by-the-by they smile at blandly, as though these last were mere child’s play), and they discuss our modern

social problems and theories with a Socratic-like incisiveness and composure such as our parliamentary howlers would do well to imitate. Their doctrine is . . . but I will not bore you by a theological disquisition,—enough to say it is founded on Christianity, and that at present I don't quite know what to make of it! And now, my dear Villiers, farewell! An answer to this is unnecessary, besides I can give you no address, as it is uncertain where I shall be for the next two or three months. If I don't get as much pleasure as I anticipate from the contemplation of the Babylonian ruins, I shall probably take up my abode in Bagdad for a time and try to fancy myself back in the days of 'good Haroun Alraschid.' At any rate whatever becomes of me, I know I have entrusted my Poem to safe hands—and all I ask of you is that it may be brought out with the least possible delay,—for its *immediate publication* seems to me just now the most vitally important thing in the world, except except the adventure on which I am at present engaged, of which more hereafter, . . . when we meet. Until then think as well of me as you can, and believe me

“ Ever and most truly your friend

“ THEOS ALWYN.”

This letter finished, folded, and sealed, Alwyn once more took up his manuscript and meditated anew concerning its title. Stay!..—why not call it by the name of the ideal heroine whose heart-passion and sorrow formed the nucleus of the legend?.. a name that he in very truth was all unconscious of having chosen, but which occurred frequently with musical persistence throughout the entire poem. “NOURHÀLMA!” .. it had a soft sound... it seemed to breathe of Eastern languor and love-singing,—it was surely the best title he could have. Straightway deciding thereon, he wrote it clearly at the top of the first page, thus: “Nourhàlma; A Love-Legend of the Past,” .. then turning to the end, he signed his own name with a bold flourish, thus attesting his indisputable right to the authorship of what was not only destined to be the most famous poetical masterpiece of the day, but was also soon to prove the most astonishing, complex, and humiliating problem ever suggested to his brain. Carefully numbering the pages, he folded them in a neat packet, which he tied strongly and sealed—then addressing it to his friend, he put letter and packet together, and eyed them both somewhat wistfully, feeling that with them went his great chance of immortal Fame. Immortal Fame!—

what a grand vista of fair possibilities those words unveiled to his imagination! Lost in pleasant musings, he looked out again on the landscape. The sun had sunk behind the mountains so far, that nothing was left of his glowing presence but a golden rim from which great glittering rays spread upward like lifted lances poised against the purple and roseate clouds. A slight click caused by the opening of the door disturbed his reverie,—he turned round in his chair, and half rose from it as Heliobas entered, carrying a small richly chased silver casket.

“Ah, good Heliobas! here you are at last,” he said with a smile. “I began to think you were never coming. My correspondence is finished,—and, as you see, my poem is addressed to England—where I pray it may meet with a better fate than has hitherto attended my efforts!”

“You *pray*?” queried Heliobas, meaningly, “or you *hope*? There is a difference between the two.”

“I suppose there is,” he returned nonchalantly. “And certainly—to be correct—I should have said I *hope*, for I never pray. What have you there?”—this as Heliobas set the casket he carried down on the table before

him. "A reliquary? And is it supposed to contain a fragment of the true Cross? Alas! I cannot believe in these fragments—there are too many of them!"

Heliobas laughed gently.

"You are right! Moreover, not a single splinter of the true Cross is in existence. It was, like other crosses then in general use, thrown aside as lumber,—and had rotted away into the earth long before the Empress Helena started on her piously-crazed wanderings. No, I have nothing of that sort in here,"—and taking a key from a small chain that hung at his girdle, he unlocked the casket. "This has been in the possession of the various members of our Order for ages,—it is our chief treasure, and is seldom, I may say never, shown to strangers,—but the mystic mandate you have received concerning the 'field of Ardath' entitles you to see what I think must needs prove interesting to you under the circumstances." And opening the box he lifted out a small square volume bound in massive silver and double-clasped. "This," he went on, "is the original text of a portion of the 'Visions of Esdras,' and dates from the thirtieth year after the downfall of Babylon's commercial prosperity."

Alwyn uttered an exclamation of incredulous amazement. “Not possible!” he cried . . . then he added eagerly, “May I look at it?”

Silently Heliobas placed it in his outstretched hand. As he undid the clasps a faint odour like that of long dead rose-leaves came like a breath on the air, . . . he opened it, and saw that its pages consisted of twelve moderately thick sheets of ivory, which were covered all over with curious small characters finely engraved thereon by some evidently sharp and well-pointed instrument. These letters were utterly unknown to Alwyn: he had seen nothing like them in any of the ancient tongues, and he examined them perplexedly.

“What language is this?” he asked at last, looking up. “It is not Hebrew—nor yet Sanskrit—nor does it resemble any of the discovered forms of hieroglyphic writing. Can *you* understand it?”

“Perfectly!” returned Heliobas. “If I could not, then much of the wisdom and science of past ages would be closed to my researches. It is the language once commonly spoken by certain great nations which existed long before the foundations of Babylon were laid. Little by little it fell into disuse, till it

was only kept up among scholars and sages, and in time became known only as ‘the language of Prophecy.’ When Esdras wrote his Visions they were originally divided into two hundred and four books,—and, as you will see by referring to what is now called the Apocrypha,¹ he was commanded to publish them all openly to the ‘worthy and unworthy’—all except the ‘seventy last,’ which were to be delivered solely to such as were ‘wise among the people.’ Thus, one hundred and thirty-four were written in the vulgar tongue,—the remaining seventy in the ‘language of prophecy,’ for the use of deeply learned and scientific men alone. The volume you hold is one of those seventy.”

“How did you come by it?” asked Alwyn, curiously turning the book over and over.

“How did our Order come by it, you mean,” said Heliobas. “Very simply. Chaldean fraternities existed in the time of Esdras, and to the supreme Chief of these, Esdras himself delivered it. You look dubious, but I assure you it is quite authentic,—we have its entire history up to date.”

“Then are you all Chaldeans here?”

“Not all—but most of us. Three of the

¹ *Vide* 2 Esdras xiv. 44—48.

brethren are Egyptians, and two are natives of Damascus. The rest are, like myself, descendants of a race supposed to have perished from off the face of the earth, yet still powerful to a degree undreamed of by the men of this puny age.”

Alwyn gave an upward glance at the speaker's regal form—a glance of genuine admiration.

“As far as that goes,” he said, with a frank laugh, “I'm quite willing to believe you and your companions are kings in disguise,—you all have that appearance! But regarding this book,”—and again he turned over the silver-bound relic—“if its authenticity can be proved as you say, why, the British Museum would give, ah! . . . let me see!—it would give . . .”

“Nothing!” declared Heliobas quietly, “believe me, nothing! The British Government would no doubt accept it as a gift, just as it would with equal alacrity accept the veritable signature of Homer, which we also possess in another retreat of ours on the Isle of Lemnos. But our treasures are neither for giving nor selling, and with respect to this original ‘Esdras,’ it will certainly never pass out of our hands.”

“And what of the other missing sixty-nine books?” asked Alwyn.

“They may possibly be somewhere in the

world,—two of them, I know, were buried in the coffin of one of the last princes of Chaldea,—perhaps they will be unearthed some day. There is also a rumour to the effect that Esdras engraved his ‘Last Prophecy’ on a small oval tablet of pure jasper, which he himself secreted, no one knows where. But to come to the point of immediate issue, . . . shall I find out and translate for you the allusions to the ‘field of Ardath’ contained in this present volume?”

“Do!” said Alwyn, eagerly, at once returning the book to Heliobas, who, seating himself at the table, began carefully looking over its ivory pages—“I am all impatience! Even without the vision I have had, I should still feel a desire to see this mysterious Field for its own sake,—it must have some very strange associations to be worth specifying in such a particular manner!”

Heliobas answered nothing—he was entirely occupied in examining the small closely engraved characters in which the ancient record was written;—the crimson after-glow of the now descended sun flared through the window and sent a straight rosy ray on his bent head and white robes, lighting to a more lustrous brilliancy the golden cross and jewelled star on his breast, and flashing round the silver

clasps of the time-honoured relic before him. Presently he looked up . .

“Here we have it!” and he placed his finger on one especial passage—“it reads as follows:—

“*And the Angel bade me enter a waste field, and the field was barren and dry save of herbs, and the name of the field was ARDATH.*

“*And I wandered therein through the hours of the long night, and the silver eyes of the field did open before me and I saw signs and wonders:*

“*And I heard a voice crying aloud, Esdras, Esdras.*

“*And I arose and stood on my feet and listened and refrained not till I heard the voice again,*

“*Which said unto me, Behold the field thou thoughtest barren, how great a glory hath the moon unveiled!*

“*And I beheld and was sore amazed: for I was no longer myself but another.*

“*And the sword of death was in that other’s soul, and yet that other was but myself in pain;*

“*And I knew not those things that were once familiar,—and my heart failed within me for very fear.*

“*And the voice cried aloud again saying: Hide thee from the perils of the past and the perils of the future, for a great and terrible thing is come upon thee against which thy strength is as a reed in the wind and thy thoughts as flying sand. . .*

“*¹And, lo, I lay as one that had been dead and mine understanding was taken from me. And he (the Angel) took me by the right hand and comforted me and set me upon my feet and said unto me—*

“*What aileth thee? and why art thou so disquieted?*

¹ See 2 Esdras x. 30—32.

ARDATH.

and why is thine understanding troubled and the thoughts of thine heart?

“And I said, Because thou hast forsaken me and yet I did according to thy words, and I went into the field and lo! I have seen and yet see that I am not able to express.”

Here Heliobas paused having read the last sentence with peculiarly impressive emphasis.

“That is all”—he said—“I see no more allusions to the name of Ardath. The last three verses are the same as those in the accepted Apocrypha.”





CHAPTER VII.

AN UNDESIRED BLESSING.

ALWYN had listened with an absorbed yet somewhat mystified air of attention.

“The venerable Esdras was certainly a poet in his own way!” he remarked lightly. “There is something very fascinating about the rhythm of his lines, though I confess I don’t grasp their meaning. Still, I should like to have them all the same,—will you let me write them out just as you have translated them?”

Willingly assenting to this, Heliobas read the extract over again, Alwyn taking down the words from his dictation.

“Perhaps,” he then added musingly, “perhaps it would be as well to copy a few passages from the Apocrypha also.”

Whereupon the Bible was brought into re-

quisition, and the desired quotations made consisting of verses xxiv. to xxvi. in the¹ ninth chapter of the Second Book of Esdras, and verses xxv. to xxvi. in the tenth chapter of the same. This done Heliobas closed and clasped the original text of the Prophet's work and returned it to its casket; then addressing his guest in a kindly yet serious tone he said, "You are quite resolved to undertake this journey, Mr. Alwyn?"

Alwyn looked dreamily out of the window at the flame of the sunset-hues reflected from the glowing sky on the white summit of the mountains.

"Yes, . . . I . . . I think so!" The answer had a touch of indecision in it.

"In that case," resumed Heliobas, "I have prepared a letter of introduction for you to one of our Order known as Elzéar of Melyana,—he is a recluse, and his hermitage is situated close to the Babylonian ruins. You will find rest and shelter there after the fatigues of travel. I have also traced out a map of the district, and the exact position of the field you seek, . . . here it is," and he laid a square piece of parchment on the table, "you can easily perceive at

¹ The reader is requested to refer to the parts of "Esdras" here indicated.

a glance how the land lies. There are a few directions written at the back, so I think you will have no difficulty. This is the letter to Elzéar"—here he held out a folded paper—"will you take it now?"

Alwyn received it with a dubious smile, and eyed the donor as if he rather suspected the sincerity of his intentions.

"Thanks very much!" he murmured listlessly. "You are exceedingly good to make it all such plain sailing for me,—and yet.. to be quite frank with you, I can't help thinking I am going on a fool's errand!"

"If that is your opinion, why go at all?" queried Heliobas with a slight disdain in his accents. "Return to England instead—forget the name of 'Ardath,' and forget also the one who bade you meet her there, and who has waited for you 'these many thousand days!'"

Alwyn started as if he had been stung.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "If I could be certain of seeing her again!.. if .. good God! the idea seems absurd!.. if that Flower-Crowned Wonder of my dream should actually fulfil her promise and keep her tryst.."

"Well!" demanded Heliobas—"If so, what then?"

“Why then I will believe in anything!” he cried — “No miracle will seem miraculous.. no impossibility impossible!”

Heliobas sighed, and regarded him thoughtfully.

“You *think* you will believe!” he said somewhat sadly—“But doubts such as yours are not easily dispelled. Angels have ere now descended to men, and men have neither received nor recognised them. Angels walk by our side through crowded cities and lonely woodlands,—they watch us when we sleep, they hear us when we pray, . . . and yet the human eye sees nothing save the material objects within reach of its vision and is not very sure of those, while it can no more discern the spiritual presences than it can without a microscope discern the lovely living creatures contained in a drop of dew or a ray of sunshine. Our earthly sight is very limited—it can neither perceive the infinitely little nor the infinitely great. And it is possible,—nay, it is most probable, that even as Peter of old denied his Divine Master, so you, if brought face to face with the Angel of your last night’s experience, would deny and endeavour to disprove her identity.”

“Never!” declared Alwyn, with a pas-

sionate gesture—"I should know her among a thousand!"

For one instant Heliobas bent upon him a sudden, searching almost pitiful glance, then withdrawing his gaze he said gently . .

"Well, well! let us hope for the best,—God's ways are inscrutable,—and you tell me that now,—now after your strange so-called 'vision'—you believe in God?"

"I did say so certainly . ." and Alwyn's face flushed a little . . "but . ."

"Ah! . . you hesitate! there is a 'but' in the case!" and Heliobas turned upon him with a grand reproach in his brilliant eyes . . "Already stepping backward on the road! . . already rushing once again into the darkness! . ." He paused—then laying one hand on the young man's shoulder, continued in mild yet impressive accents . . "My friend, remember that the doubter and opposer of God, is also the doubter and opposer of his own well-being. Let this unnatural and useless combat of Human Reason against Divine Instinct cease within you,—you, who as a poet are bound to *equalize* your nature that it may the more harmoniously fulfil its high commission. You know what one of your modern writers says of life? . . . that it is a 'Dream in which we

clutch at shadows as though they were substances and sleep deepest when fancying ourselves most awake.'¹ Believe me, *you* have slept long enough,—it is time you awoke to the full realization of your destinies."

Alwyn heard in silence, feeling inwardly rebuked and half ashamed—the earnestly-spoken words moved him more than he cared to show,—his head drooped—he made no reply. After all, he thought, he had really no more substantial foundation for his unbelief than others had for their faith. With all his studies in the modern schools of science, he was not a whit more advanced in learning than Democritus of old—Democritus who based his system of morals on the severest mathematical lines, taking as his starting-point a vacuum and atoms, and who after stretching his intellect on a constant rack of searching inquiry for years, came at last to the unhappy conclusion that man is absolutely incapable of positive knowledge, and that even if truth is in his possession he can never be certain of it. Was he, Theos Alwyn, wiser than Democritus? . . . or was this stately Chaldean monk, with the clear pathetic eyes and tender smile, and the symbol of Christ on his breast, wiser than both? . . . wiser in the

¹ Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.

AN UNDESIRED BLESSING.

wisdom of eternal things than any of the subtle-minded ancient Greek philosophers or modern imitators of their theories? Was there, *could* there be something not yet altogether understood or fathomed in the Christian creed? . . . as this idea occurred to him he looked up and met his companion's calm gaze fixed upon him with a watchful gentleness and patience.

"Are you reading my thoughts, Heliobas?" he asked with a forced laugh. "I assure you they are not worth the trouble."

Heliobas smiled, but made no answer. Just then one of the monks entered the room with a large lighted lamp which he set on the table, and the conversation thus interrupted was not again resumed.

The evening shadows were now closing in rapidly, and already above the furthest visible snow-peak the first risen star sparkled faintly in the darkening sky. Soon the vesper bell began ringing as it had rung on the previous night when Alwyn, newly arrived, had sat alone in the refectory, listlessly wondering what manner of men he had come amongst and what would be the final result of his adventure into the wilds of Caucasus. His feelings had certainly undergone some change since then, inasmuch as he was no longer disposed to ridicule or condemn re-

ligious sentiment, though he was nearly as far from actually believing in Religion itself as ever. The attitude of his mind was still distinctly sceptical,—the immutable pride of what he considered his own firmly-rooted convictions was only very slightly shaken—and he now even viewed the prospect of his journey to the ‘field of Ardath’ as a mere fantastic whim—a caprice of his own fancy which he chose to gratify just for the sake of curiosity.

But notwithstanding the stubbornness of the materialistic principles with which he had become imbued, his higher instincts were, unconsciously to himself, beginning to be aroused—his memory involuntarily wandered back to the sweet fresh days of his earliest manhood before the poison of Doubt had filtered through his soul,—his character, naturally of the lofty, imaginative and ardent cast, re-asserted its native force over the blighting blow of blank Atheism which had for a time paralyzed its efforts,—and as he unwittingly yielded more and more to the mild persuasion of these genial influences, so the former Timon-like bitterness of his humour gradually softened. There was no trace in him now of the dark, ironic and reckless scorn that, before his recent visionary experience,

AN UNDESIRED BLESSING.

had distinguished his whole manner and bearing—the smile came more readily to his lips—and he seemed content for the present to display the sunny side of his nature,—a nature impassioned, frank, generous and noble, in spite of the taint of overweening ambitious egotism which somewhat warped its true quality and narrowed the range of its sympathies. In his then frame of mind, a curious vague sense of half-pleasurable penitence was upon him,—delicate, undefined, almost devotional suggestions stirred his thoughts with the refreshment that a cool wind brings to parched and drooping flowers,—so that when Heliobas, taking up the silver ‘Esdras’ reliquary and preparing to leave the apartment in response to the vesper summons, said gently, “Will you attend our service, Mr. Alwyn?” he assented at once with a pleased alacrity which somewhat astonished himself as he remembered how on the previous evening he had despised and inwardly resented all forms of religious observance.

However, he did not stop to consider the reason of his altered mood, . . . he followed the monks into chapel with an air of manly grace and quiet reverence that became him much better than the offensive and defensive demeanour he had erewhile chosen to assume in the same

prayer-hallowed place,—he listened to the impressive ceremonial from beginning to end without the least fatigue or impatience,—and though when the brethren knelt, he could not humble himself so far as to kneel also, he still made a slight concession to appearances by sitting down and keeping his head in a bent posture—“out of respect for the good intentions of these worthy men,” as he told himself to silence the inner conflict of his own opposing and contradictory sensations. The service concluded, he waited as before to see the monks pass out, and was smitten with a sudden surprise, compunction and regret, when Heliobas, who walked last as usual, paused where he stood, and confronted him, saying—

“I will bid you farewell here, my friend!.. I have many things to do this evening, and it is best I should see you no more before your departure.”

“Why?” asked Alwyn astonished—“I had hoped for another conversation with you.”

“To what purpose?” inquired Heliobas mildly. “That I should assert.. and you deny.. facts that God Himself will prove in His own way and at His own appointed time? Nay, we should do no good by further arguments.”

“But,” stammered Alwyn hastily, flushing

hotly as he spoke, "you give me no chance to thank you . . . to express my gratitude."

"Gratitude?" questioned Heliobas almost mournfully, with a tinge of reproach in his soft mellow voice. "Are you grateful for being, as you think, deluded by a trance? . . . cheated, as it were, into a sort of semi-belief in the life to come by means of mesmerism? Your first request to me, I know, was that you might be deceived by my influence into a state of imaginary happiness,—and now you fancy your last night's experience was merely the result of that pre-eminently foolish desire! You are wrong! . . . and, as matters stand, no thanks are needed. If I had indeed mesmerized or hypnotized you, I might perhaps have deserved some reward for the exertion of my purely professional skill, but . . . as I have told you already . . . I have done absolutely nothing. Your fate is, as it has always been, in your own hands. You sought me of your own accord . . . you used me as an instrument, an unwilling instrument, remember! . . . whereby to break open the prison doors of your chafed and fretting spirit,—and the end of it all is that you depart from hence to-morrow of your own free-will and choice, to fulfil the appointed tryst made with you, as you believe, by a

phantom in a vision. In brief"—here he spoke more slowly and with marked emphasis—"you go to the field of Ardath to solve a puzzling problem... namely, as to whether what we call life is not a Dream—and whether a Dream may not perchance be proved Reality! In this enterprise of yours I have no share—nor will I say more than this... God speed you on your errand!"

He held out his hand—Alwyn grasped it, looking earnestly meanwhile at the fine intellectual face, the clear pathetic eyes, the firm yet sensitive mouth on which there just then rested a serious yet kindly smile.

"What a strange man you are, Heliobas!" he said impulsively.. "I wish I knew more about you!"—

Heliobas gave him a friendly glance.

"Wish rather that you knew more about yourself"—he answered simply—"Fathom your own mystery of being—you shall find none deeper, greater or more difficult of comprehension!"

Alwyn still held his hand, reluctant to let it go. Finally releasing it with a slight sigh he said—

"Well, at any rate though we part now it will not be for long. We *must* meet again!"

AN UNDESIRED BLESSING.

“Why if we must, we shall!” rejoined Heliobas cheerily. “*Must* cannot be prevented! In the meantime . . . farewell!”

“Farewell!” and as this word was spoken, their eyes met. Instinctively and on a sudden impulse Alwyn bowed his head in the lowest and most reverential salutation he had perhaps ever made to any creature of mortal mould, and as he did so Heliobas paused in the act of turning away . . .

“Do you care for a blessing, gentle Sceptic?” he asked in a soft tone that thrilled tenderly through the silence of the dimly-lit chapel,—then, receiving no reply, he laid one hand gently on the young man’s dark clustering curls, and with the other slowly traced the sign of the cross upon the smooth broad fairness of his forehead.—“Take it, my son! . . . the only blessing I can give thee,—the blessing of the Cross of Christ, which in spite of thy desertion claims thee, redeems thee and will yet possess thee for its own!”

And before Alwyn could recover from his astonishment sufficiently to interrupt and repudiate this, to him, undesired form of benediction, Heliobas had gone, and he was left alone. Lifting his head he stared out into the further corridor, down which he just perceived

a distant glimmer of vanishing white robes,—and for a moment he was filled with speechless indignation. It seemed to him that the sign thus traced on his brow must be actually visible like a red brand burnt into his flesh,—and all his old and violent prejudices against Christianity rushed back upon him with the resentful speed of once-baffled foes returning anew to storm a citadel. Almost as rapidly however, his anger cooled,—he remembered that in his vision of the previous night, the light that had guided him through the long shadowy vista had always preceded him in the form of a Cross,—and in a softer mood he glanced at the ruby Star shining steadily above the otherwise darkened altar. Involuntarily the words “We have seen His Star in the East and are come to worship Him”—occurred to his memory, but he dismissed them as instantly as they suggested themselves, and finding his own thoughts growing perplexing and troublesome he hastily left the chapel.

Joining some of the monks who were gathered in a picturesque group round the fire in the refectory he sat chatting with them for about half an hour or so hoping to elicit from them in the course of conversation some particulars concerning the daily life, character, and profess-

ing aims of their superior,—but in this attempt he failed. They spoke of Heliobas as believing men may speak of saints, with hushed reverence and admiring tenderness—but on any point connected with his faith or the spiritual nature of his theories they held their peace, evidently deeming the subject too sacred for discussion. Baffled in all his inquiries Alwyn at last said good-night, and retired to rest in the small sleeping apartment prepared for his accommodation, where he enjoyed a sound, refreshing and dreamless slumber.

The next morning he was up at daybreak, and long before the sun had risen above the highest peak of Caucasus, he had departed from the Lars Monastery, leaving a handsome donation in the poor-box towards the various charitable works in which the brethren were engaged, such as the rescue of travellers lost in the snow, or the burial of the many victims murdered on, or near the Pass of Dariel by the bands of fierce mountain robbers and assassins, that at certain seasons infest that solitary region. Making the best of his way to the fortress of Passanaur, he there joined a party of adventurous Russian climbers who had just successfully accomplished the ascent of Mount Kazbek, and in their company proceeded

through the rugged Aragua valley to Tiflis which he reached that same evening. From this dark and dismal-looking town shadowed on all sides by barren and cavernous hills, he despatched the manuscript of his mysteriously composed poem, together with the letter concerning it, to his friend Villiers in England,—and then, yielding to a burning sense of impatience within himself,—impatience that would brook no delay,—he set out resolutely and at once, on his long pilgrimage to the “land of sand and ruin and gold”—the land of terrific prophecy and stern fulfilment,—the land of mighty and mournful memories, where the slow river Euphrates clasps in its dusky yellow ring the ashes of great kingdoms fallen to rise no more.





CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON.

IT was no light or easy journey he had thus rashly undertaken on the faith of a dream,—for dream he still believed it to be. Many weary days and nights were consumed in the comfortless tedium of travel, . . . and though he constantly told himself what unheard-of folly it was to pursue an illusive chimera of his own imagination,—a mere phantasm which had somehow or other taken possession of his brain at a time when that brain must have been acted upon (so he continued to think) by strong mesmeric or magnetic influence, he went on his way all the same with a sort of dogged obstinacy which no fatigue could daunt or lessen. He never lay down to rest without the faint hope of seeing once again, if only in sleep, the radiant Being whose haunting words had sent him on this quest of “Ardath,”—but

herein his expectations were not realized. No more flower-crowned angels floated before him—no sweet whisper of love, encouragement or promise came mysteriously on his ears in the midnight silences,—his slumbers were always profound and placid as those of a child and utterly dreamless.

One consolation he had however, . . . he could write. Not a day passed without his finding some new inspiration . . . some fresh, quaint and lovely thought, that flowed of itself into most perfect and rhythmical utterance,—glorious lines of verse glowing with fervour and beauty seemed to fall from his pencil without any effort on his part,—and if he had had reason in former times to doubt the strength of his poetical faculty, it was now very certain he could do so no longer. His mind was as a fine harp newly strung, at-tuned, and quivering with the consciousness of the music pent-up within it,—and as he remembered the masterpiece of poesy he had written in his seeming trance, the manuscript of which would soon be in the hands of the London publishers, his heart swelled with a growing and irrepressible sense of pride. For he knew and felt—with an undefinable yet positive certainty—that however much the public or the critics might gainsay him, his fame as

a poet of the very highest order would ere long be asserted and assured. A deep tranquillity was in his soul. . . . a tranquillity that seemed to increase the further he went onward,—the restless weariness that had once possessed him was past, and a vaguely sweet content pervaded his being like the odour of early roses pervading warm air. . . he felt, he hoped, he loved! and yet his feelings, hopes and longings turned to something altogether undeclared and indefinite, as softly dim and distant as the first faint white cloud-signal wafted from the moon in heaven, when on the point of rising, she makes her queenly purpose known to her waiting star-attendants.

Practically considered, his journey was tedious and for the most part dull and uninteresting. In these Satan-like days of “going to and fro in the earth and walking up and down in it” travelling has lost much of its old romantic charm, . . the idea of traversing long distances no more fills the expectant adventurer with a pleasurable sense of uncertainty and mystery—he knows exactly what to anticipate. . . it is all laid out for him plainly on the level lines of the commonplace and nothing is left to his imagination. The Continent of Europe has been ransacked from end to end by tourists who have turned

it into a sort of exhausted pleasure-garden whereof the various entertainments are too familiarly known to arouse any fresh curiosity,—the East is nearly in the same condition,—hordes of British and American sight-seers scamper over the empire-strewn soil of Persia and Syria with the unconcerned indifference of beings to whom not only a portion of the world's territory, but the whole world itself belongs,—and soon there will not be an inch of ground left on the narrow extent of our poor planet that has not been trodden by the hasty, scrambling, irreverent, footsteps of some one or other of the ever-prolific, all-spreading English-speaking race.

On his way Alwyn met many of his countrymen,—travellers who, like himself had visited the Caucasus and Armenia and were now *en route*, some for Damascus, some for Jerusalem and the Holy Land—others again for Cairo and Alexandria to depart from thence homeward by the usual Mediterranean line, .. but among these birds-of-passage acquaintance he chanced upon none who were going to the Ruins of Babylon. He was glad of this—for the peculiar nature of his enterprise rendered a companion altogether undesirable,—and though on one occasion he encountered a gentleman-novelist with a note-book, who

was exceedingly anxious to fraternize with him and discover whither he was bound, he succeeded in shaking off this would-be incubus at Mosul, by taking him to a wonderful old library in that city where there were a number of French translations of Turkish and Syriac romances. Here the gentleman-novelist straightway ascended to the seventh heaven of plagiarism, and began to copy energetically whole scenes and descriptive passages from dead-and-gone authors, unknown to English critics, for the purpose of inserting them hereafter into his own "original" work of fiction—and in this congenial occupation he forgot all about the "dark handsome man, with the wide brows of a Marc Antony and the lips of a Catullus" as he had already described Alwyn in the note-book before-mentioned. While in Mosul, Alwyn himself picked up a curiosity in the way of literature,—a small quaint volume entitled "THE FINAL PHILOSOPHY OF ALGAZZALI THE ARABIAN." It was printed in two languages—the original Arabic on one page and, facing it, the translation in very old French. The author, born A.D. 1058, described himself as "a poor student striving to discern the truth of things"—and his work was a serious, incisive, patiently exhaustive inquiry

into the workings of nature, the capabilities of human intelligence and the deceptive results of human reason. Reading it, Alwyn was astonished to find that nearly all the ethical propositions offered for the world's consideration to-day by the most learned and cultured minds, had been already advanced and thoroughly discussed by this same Algazzali. One passage in particular arrested his attention as being singularly applicable to his own immediate condition, . . . it ran as follows,—

“ I began to examine the objects of sensation and speculation to see if they could possibly admit of doubt. Then doubts crowded upon me in such numbers that my incertitude became complete. Whence results the confidence I have in sensible things? The strongest of all our senses is sight,—yet if we look at the stars they seem to be as small as money-pieces—but mathematical proofs convince us that they are larger than the earth. These and other things are judged by the *senses*, but rejected by *reason* as false. I abandoned the senses therefore having seen my confidence in their *absolute truth* shaken. Perhaps, said I, there is no assurance but in the notions of reason? . . . that is to say, first principles, as that ten is more than three? Upon this the *senses* replied :

What assurance have you that your confidence in *reason* is not of the same nature as your confidence in *us*? When you relied on us, reason stepped in and gave us the lie,—had not reason been there you would have continued to rely on us. Well, may there not exist some other judge *superior* to reason who, if he appeared would refute the judgments of reason in the same way that reason refuted us? The non-appearance of such a judge is no proof of his non-existence.... I strove to answer this objection and my difficulties increased when I came to reflect on sleep. I said to myself: During sleep you give to visions a reality and consistence, and on awakening you are made aware that they were nothing but visions. What assurance have you that all you feel and know does actually exist? It is all true as respects your condition at the moment,—but it is nevertheless possible that another condition should present itself which should be to your awakened state, that which your awakened state is now to your sleep,—*so that as respects this higher condition your waking is but sleep.*"

Over and over again Alwyn read these words and pondered on the deep and difficult problems they suggested, and he was touched to an odd sense of shamed compunction, when

at the close of the book he came upon Algazali's confession of utter vanquishment and humility thus simply recorded :—

“ I examined my actions and found the best were those relating to instruction and education, and even there I saw myself given up to unimportant sciences all useless in another world. Reflecting on the aim of my teaching I found it was not pure in the sight of the Lord. *I saw that all my efforts were directed toward the acquisition of glory to myself.* Having therefore distributed my wealth I left Bagdad and retired into Syria where I remained in solitary struggle with my soul, combating my passions and exercising myself in the purification of my heart and in preparation for the other world.”

This ancient philosophical treatise together with the mystical passage from the original text of Esdras and the selected verses from the Apocrypha formed all Alwyn's stock of reading for the rest of his journey,—the rhapsodical lines of the Prophet he knew by heart as one knows a favourite poem, and he often caught himself unconsciously repeating the strange words : “ *Behold the field thou thoughtest barren : how great a glory hath the moon unveiled !* ”

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON.

“ And I beheld, and was sore amazed, for I was no longer myself but another :

“ And the sword of death was in that other’s soul: and yet that other was but myself in pain.

“ And I knew not the things that were once familiar and my heart failed within me for very fear”

What did they mean, he wondered? or had they any meaning at all beyond the faint far-off suggestions of thought that may occasionally and with difficulty be discerned through obscure and reckless ecstasies of language which ‘full of sound and fury signify nothing’? Was there, could there be anything mysterious or sacred in this ‘waste field’ anciently known as ‘Ardath’? These questions flitted hazily from time to time through his brain, but he made no attempt to answer them either by refutation or reason, . . . indeed sober, matter-of-fact reason, he was well aware, played no part in his present undertaking.

It was late in the afternoon of a sultry parching day when he at last arrived at Hillah. This dull little town, built at the beginning of the twelfth century out of the then plentifully scattered fragments of Babylon, has nothing to offer to the modern traveller save various annoyances in the shape of excessive heat, dust

or rather fine blown sand,—dirt, flies, bad food and general discomfort ; and finding the aspect of the place not only untempting but positively depressing, Alwyn left his surplus luggage at a small and unpretentious hostelry kept by a Frenchman who catered specially for archæological tourists and explorers, and after an hour's rest, set out alone and on foot for the 'eastern quarter' of the ruins,—namely those which are considered by investigators to begin about two miles above Hillah. A little beyond them and close to the river-bank, according to the directions he had received, dwelt the religious recluse for whom he brought the letter of introduction from Heliobas,—a letter bearing on its cover a superscription in Latin which translated ran thus:—"To the venerable and much esteemed Elzéar of Melyana, at the Hermitage, near Hillah. In faith, peace and good-will. Greeting." Anxious to reach Elzéar's abode before nightfall, he walked on as briskly as the heat and heaviness of the sandy soil would allow, keeping to the indistinctly traced path that crossed and re-crossed at intervals the various ridges of earth strewn with pulverized fragments of brick, bitumen and pottery, which are now the sole remains of stately buildings once famous in Babylon.

A low red sun was sinking slowly on the edge of the horizon, when, pausing to look about him, he perceived in the near distance, the dark outline of the great mound known as Birs-Nimroud, and realized with a sort of shock that he was actually surrounded on all sides by the crumbled and almost indistinguishable ruins of the formerly superb all-dominant Assyrian city that had been "as a golden cup in the Lord's hand" and was now no more in very truth than a "broken and an empty vessel." For the words . . . "And Babylon shall become heaps," have certainly been verified with startling exactitude—"heaps" indeed it has become,—nothing *but* heaps,—heaps of dull earth with here and there a few faded green tufts of wild tamarisk, which while faintly relieving the blankness of the ground, at the same time intensify its monotonous dreariness. Alwyn beholding the mournful desolation of the scene, felt a strong sense of disappointment,—he had expected something different—his imagination had pictured these historical ruins as being of larger extent and more imposing character. His eyes rested rather wearily on the slow dull gleam of the Euphrates as it wound past the deserted spaces where "the mighty city the astonishment of nations" had once stood, . . .

and poet though he was to the very core of his nature he could see nothing poetical in these spectral mounds and stone heaps, save in the significant remembrance they offered of the old Scriptural prophecy — “Babylon is fallen—is fallen! Her princes, her wise men, her captains, her rulers and her mighty men shall sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake, saith the King who is the Lord of Hosts.” And truly it seemed as if the curse which had blighted the city’s by-gone splendour, had doomed even its ruins to appear contemptible.

Just then the glow of the disappearing sun touched the upper edge of Birs-Nimroud, giving it for one instant a weird effect, as though the ghost of some Babylonian watchman were waving a lit torch from its summit,—but the lurid glare soon faded and a dead grey twilight settled solemnly down over the melancholy landscape. With a sudden feeling of dejection and lassitude upon him, Alwyn, heaving a deep sigh, went onward, and soon perceived, lying a little to the north of the river, a small roughly erected tenement with a wooden cross on its roof. Rightly concluding that this must be Elzéar of Melyana’s hermitage, he quickly made his way thither and knocked at the door.

It was opened to him at once by a white-

haired picturesque old man, who received him with a mute sign of welcome, and who at the same time laid one hand lightly but expressively on his own lips to signify that he was dumb. This was Elzéar himself. He was attired in the same sort of flowing garb as that worn by the monks of Dariel, and with his tall, spare figure, long silvery beard and deep-sunken yet still brilliant dark eyes, he might have served as a perfect model for one of the inspired prophets of bygone ancient days. Though Nature had deprived him of speech, his serene countenance spoke eloquently in his favour, its mild benevolent expression betokening that inward peace of the heart which so often renders old age more beautiful than youth. He perused with careful slowness the letter Alwyn presented to him,—and then, inclining his head gravely he made a courteous and comprehensive gesture, to intimate that himself and all that his house contained were at the service of the new-comer. He proceeded to testify the sincerity of this assurance at once by setting a plentiful supply of food and wine before his guest, waiting upon him, moreover, while he ate and drank, with a respectful humility which somewhat embarrassed Alwyn, who wished to

spare him the trouble of such attendance and told him so many times with much earnestness. But all to no purpose—Elzéar only smiled gently and continued to perform the duties of hospitality in his own way... it was evidently no use interfering with him. Later on he showed his visitor a small cell-like apartment containing a neat bed, together with a table, a chair, and a large Crucifix which latter object was suspended against the wall, . . . and indicating by eloquent signs that here the weariest traveller might find good repose, he made a low salutation and departed altogether for the night.

What a still place the 'Hermitage' was thought Alwyn, as soon as Elzéar's retreating steps had died away into silence. There was not a sound to be heard anywhere, . . . not even the faint rustle of leaves stirred by the wind. And what a haunting, grave, wistfully tender expression filled the face of that sculptured Image on the Cross, which, in intimate companionship with himself seemed to possess the little room! He could not bear the down-drooping appealing, penetrating look in those heavenly-kind yet piteous Eyes, . . . turning abruptly away he opened the narrow window and folding his arms on the sill surveyed the

scene before him. The full moon was rising slowly, . . . round and large, she hung like a yellow shield on the dark dense wall of the sky. The Ruins of Babylon were plainly visible . . . the river shone like a golden ribbon, —the outline of Birs-Nimroud was faintly rimmed with light, and had little streaks of amber radiance wandering softly up and down its shadowy slopes.

“ ‘*And I went into the field called Ardat and there I sat among the flowers!*’ ” mused Alwyn half-aloud, his dreamy gaze fixed on the gradually brightening heavens . . . “Why not go there at once . . . *now?*”





CHAPTER IX.

THE FIELD OF FLOWERS.

THIS idea had no sooner entered his mind than he prepared to act upon it,—though only a short while previously, feeling thoroughly overcome by fatigue, he had resolved to wait till next day before setting out for the chief goal of his long pilgrimage. But now, strangely enough, all sense of weariness had suddenly left him,—a keen impatience burned in his veins,—and a compelling influence stronger than himself seemed to urge him on to the instant fulfilment of his purpose. The more he thought about it the more restless he became, and the more eagerly desirous to prove, with the least possible delay, the truth or the falsity of his mystic vision at Dariel. By the light of the small lamp left on the table he consulted his map,—the map Heliobas had traced,—and also the written directions that

accompanied it—though these he had read so often over and over again that he knew them by heart. They were simply and concisely worded thus :—“ On the east bank of the Euphrates, nearly opposite the ‘ Hermitage,’ there is the sunken fragment of a Bronze Gate, formerly belonging to the Palace of the Babylonian Kings. Three miles and a half to the south-west of this fragment and in a direct line with it, straight across country, will be found a fallen pillar of red granite half buried in the earth. The square tract of land extending beyond this broken column is the field known to the Prophet Esdras as the ‘*field of Ardath.*’ ”

He was on the east bank of the Euphrates already,—and a walk of three miles and a half could surely be accomplished in an hour or very little over that time. Hesitating no longer he made his way out of the house, deciding that if he met Elzéar he would say he was going for a moonlight stroll before retiring to rest. That venerable recluse however was nowhere to be seen,—and as the door of the “ Hermitage ” was only fastened with a light latch he had no difficulty in effecting a noiseless exit. Once in the open air he stopped, . . startled by the sound of full fresh youthful voices singing in clear and

harmonious unison . . . “*Kyrie eleison! Christe eleison! Kyrie eleison!*” He listened, . . . looking everywhere about him in utter amazement. There was no habitation in sight save Elzéar’s,—and the chorus certainly did not proceed from thence, but rather seemed to rise upwards through the earth, floating in released sweet echoes to and fro upon the hushed air. “*Kyrie eleison! . . . Christe eleison!*” how it swayed about him like a close chime of bells!

He stood motionless, perplexed and wondering, . . . was there a subterranean grotto near at hand where devotional chants were sung?—or, . . . and a slight tremor ran through him at the thought, was there something supernatural in the music, notwithstanding its human-seeming speech and sound? Just then it ceased, . . . all was again silent as before, . . . and angry with himself for his own foolish fancies, he set about the task of discovering the “sunken fragment” Heliobas had mentioned. Very soon he found it, driven deep into the soil and so blackened and defaced by time that it was impossible to trace any of the elaborate carvings that must have once adorned it. In fact it would not have been recognizable as the portion of a gate at all, had it not still possessed an enormous hinge which partly

THE FIELD OF FLOWERS.

clung to it by means of one huge thickly rusted nail. Close beside it, grew a tree of weird and melancholy appearance—its trunk was split asunder and one half of it was withered. The other half, leaning mournfully on one side bent down its branches to the ground, trailing a wealth of long glossy green leaves in the dust of the ruined city. This was the famous tree called by the natives Athelà, of which old legends say that it used to be a favourite evergreen much cultivated and prized by the Babylonian nobility, who, loving its pleasant shade, spared no pains to make it grow in their hanging gardens and spacious courts though its nature was altogether foreign to the soil. And now, with none to tend it or care whether it flourishes or decays, it faithfully clings to the deserted spot where it was once so tenderly fostered, showing its sympathy with the surrounding desolation, by growing always in split halves, one withered and one green—a broken-hearted creature, yet loyal to the memory of past love and joy. Alwyn stood under its dark boughs, knowing nothing of its name or history,—every now and then a wailing whisper seemed to shudder through it, though there was no wind,—and he heard the eerie lamenting sigh with an involuntary sense of

awe. The whole scene was far more impressive by night than by day,—the great earth-mounds of Babylon looked like giant graves inclosed in a glittering ring of winding waters. Again he examined the embedded fragment of the ancient gate,—and then feeling quite certain of his starting-point he set his face steadily towards the south-west,—there the landscape before him lay flat and bare in the beamy lustre of the moon. The soil was sandy and heavy to the tread,—moreover it was an excessively hot night,—too hot to walk fast. He glanced at his watch,—it was a few minutes past ten o'clock. Keeping up the moderate pace the heat enforced, it was possible he might reach the mysterious field about half-past eleven, . . perhaps earlier. And now his nerves began to quiver with strong excitement, . . . had he yielded to the promptings of his own feverish impatience, he would most probably have run all the way in spite of the sultriness of the air,—but he restrained this impulse, and walked leisurely on purpose, reproaching himself as he went along for the utter absurdity of his expectations.

“Was ever madman more mad than I!” he murmured with some self-contempt—“What logical human being in his right mind would

THE FIELD OF FLOWERS.

be guilty of such egregious folly! But am I logical? Certainly not! Am I in my right mind? I think I am,—yet I may be wrong. The question remains, . . . what *is* logic? . . . and what *is* being in one's right mind? No one can absolutely decide! Let me see if I can review calmly my ridiculous position. It comes to this,—I insist on being mesmerized . . . I have a dream, . . . and I see a woman in the dream” —here he suddenly corrected himself . . . “a woman did I say? No! . . . she was something far more than that! A lovely phantom—a dazzling creature of my own imagination . . . an exquisite ideal whom I will one day immortalize . . . yes!—*immortalize* in song!”

He raised his eyes as he spoke, to the dusky firmament thickly studded with stars, and just then caught sight of a fleecy silver-rimmed cloud passing swiftly beneath the moon and floating downwards towards earth,—it was shaped like a white-winged bird, and was here and there tenderly streaked with pink as though it had just travelled from some distant land where the sun was rising. It was the only cloud in the sky,—and it had a peculiar, almost phenomenal effect by reason of its rapid motion, there being not the faintest breeze stirring. Alwyn watched it gliding down the heavens

till it had entirely disappeared, and then began his meditations anew.

“Any one,—even without magnetic influence being brought to bear upon him might have visions such as mine! Take an opium-eater for instance, whose life is one long confused vista of visions,—suppose he were to accept all the wild suggestions offered to his drugged brain, and persist in following them out to some sort of definite conclusion,—the only place for that man would be a lunatic asylum. Even the most ordinary persons, whose minds are never excited in any abnormal way, are subject to very curious and inexplicable dreams,—but for all that, they are not such fools as to believe in them. True, there is my Poem,—I don’t know how I wrote it, yet written it is, and complete from beginning to end—an actual tangible result of my vision, and strange enough in its way, to say the least of it. But what is stranger still is, that I *love* the radiant phantom that I saw, . . . yes, actually love her with a love no mere woman, were she fair as Troy’s Helen, could ever arouse in me! Of course,—in spite of the contrary assertions made by that remarkably interesting Chaldean monk Heliobas,—I feel I am the victim of a brain-delusion,—therefore it is just as well I should see this ‘field of

Ardath' and satisfy myself that nothing comes of it—in which case I shall be cured of my craze."

He walked on for some time, and presently stopped a moment to examine his map by the light of the moon. As he did so, he became aware of the extraordinary almost terrible stillness surrounding him. He had thought the "Hermitage" silent as a closed tomb—but it was nothing to the silence here. He felt it inclosing him like a thick wall on all sides,—he heard the regular pulsations of his own heart—even the rushing of his own blood—but no other sound was audible. Earth and the air seemed breathless, as though with some pent-up mysterious excitement,—the stars were like so many large living eyes eagerly gazing down on the solitary human being who thus wandered at night in the land of the prophets of old—the moon itself appeared to stare at him in open wonderment. He grew uncomfortably conscious of this speechless watchfulness of nature,—he strained his ears to listen as it were, to the deepening dumbness of all existing things,—and to conquer the strange sensations that were overcoming him, he proceeded at a more rapid pace,—but in two or three minutes came again to an abrupt halt. For there in front of him,

right across his path lay the fallen pillar which, according to Heliobas, marked the boundary of the field he sought! Another glance at his map decided the position.. he had reached his journey's end at last! What was the time? He looked—it was just twenty minutes past eleven.

A curious unnatural calmness suddenly possessed him, . . . he surveyed with a quiet almost cold unconcern the prospect before him, —a wide level square of land covered with tufts of coarse grass and clumps of wild tamarisk, . . . nothing more. This was the Field of Ardath.. this bare unlovely wilderness without so much as a tree to grace its outline! From where he stood he could view its whole extent,—and as he beheld its complete desolation he smiled,—a faint half-bitter smile. He thought of the words in the ancient book of 'Esdras':.. *'And the Angel bade me enter a waste field, and the field was barren and dry save of herbs, and the name of the field was Ardath. And I wandered therein through the hours of the long night and the silver eyes of the field did open before me and therein I saw signs and wonders.'*

"Yes,—the field is 'barren and dry' enough in all conscience!" he murmured listlessly—
 "But as for the 'silver eyes' and the 'signs and wonders,' they must have existed only in

the venerable Prophet's imagination, just as my flower-crowned Angel-maiden exists in mine. Well! . . . now Theos Alwyn" . . . he continued, apostrophizing himself aloud,—“Are you contented? Are you quite convinced of your folly? . . . and do you acknowledge that a fair Dream is as much of a lie and a cheat as all the other fair-seeming things that puzzle and torture poor human nature? Return to your former condition of reasoning and reasonable scepticism,—aye, even atheism if you will, for the materialists are right, . . . you cannot prove a God or the possibility of any purely spiritual life. Why thus hanker after a phantom loveliness? Fame—fame! Win fame! . . . that is enough for you in this world, . . . and as for a next world, who believes in it?—and who, believing, cares?”

Soliloquizing in this fashion, he set his foot on Ardath itself, determining to walk across and around it from end to end. The grass was long and dry, yet it made no rustle beneath his tread . . . he seemed to be shod with the magic shoes of silence. He walked on till he reached about the middle of the field, where perceiving a broad flat stone near him, he sat down to rest. There was a light mist rising,—a thin moonlit-coloured vapour that crept slowly up-

ward from the ground and remained hovering like a wide suddenly-spun gossamer web, some two or three inches above it, thus giving a cool luminous watery effect to the hot and arid soil.

“According to the Apocrypha, Esdras ‘sat among the flowers’” he idly mused—“Well!.. perhaps there were flowers in those days,—but it is very evident there are none now. A more dreary, utterly desolate place than this famous ‘Ardath’ I have never seen!”

At that moment a subtle fragrance scented the still air, . . . a fragrance deliciously sweet as of violets mingled with myrtle. He inhaled the delicate odour surprised and confounded.

“Flowers after all!” he exclaimed. . . . “Or maybe some aromatic herb . . .” and he bent down to examine the turf at his feet. To his amazement he perceived a thick cluster of white blossoms, star-shaped and glossy-leaved, with deep golden centres, wherein bright drops of dew sparkled like brilliants, and from whence puffs of perfume rose like incense swung at unseen altars! He looked at them in doubt that was almost dread, . . . were they real? . . . were these the ‘silver eyes’ in which Esdras had seen ‘signs and wonders’? . . . or was he hopelessly brain-sick with delusions, and dreaming again?—

He touched them hesitatingly . . . they were actual living things, with creamy petals soft as velvet,—he was about to gather one of them,—when all at once his attention was caught and riveted by something like a faint shadow gliding across the plain. A smothered cry escaped his lips, . . . he sprang erect and gazed eagerly forward, half in hope,—half in fear. What slight Figure was that, pacing slowly, serenely and all alone in the moonlight? . . . Without another instant's pause he rushed impetuously towards it,—heedless that as he went, he trod on thousands of those strange starry blossoms, which now with sudden growth, covered and whitened every inch of the ground, thus marvellously fulfilling the words spoken of old : . . . “ *Behold the field thou thoughtest barren ; how great a glory hath the moon unveiled !* ”





CHAPTER X.

GOD'S MAIDEN EDRIS.

HE ran on swiftly for a few paces,—then coming more closely in view of the misty Shape he pursued, he checked himself abruptly and stood still, his heart sinking with a bitter and irrepressible sense of disappointment. Here surely was no Angel wanderer from unseen spheres!... only a girl, clad in floating grey draperies that clung softly to her slim figure and trailed behind her as she moved sedately along through the snow-white blossoms that bent beneath her noiseless tread. He had no eyes for the strange flower-transfiguration of the lately barren land,—all his interest was centred on the slender graceful form of the mysterious Maiden. She meanwhile, went on her way, till she reached the western boundary of the field,—there she turned, . . . hesitated a moment, . . . and then came back straight towards

him. He watched her approach as though she were some invincible fate,—and a tremor shook his limbs as she drew nearer . . . still nearer! He could see her distinctly now, all but her face,—that was in shadow, for her head was bent and her eyes were downcast. Her long fair hair flowed in a loose rippling mass over her shoulders . . . she wore a wreath of the Ardash flowers, and carried a cluster of them clasped between her small daintily shaped hands. A few steps more, and she was close beside him—she stopped as if in expectation of some word or sign . . . but he stood mute and motionless not daring to speak or stir. Then—without raising her eyes—she passed, . . . passed like a flitting vapour,—and he remained as though rooted to the spot, in a sort of vague dumb bewilderment! His stupefaction was brief however—rousing himself to swift resolution, he hastened after her.

“Stay!—stay!” he cried aloud.

Obedient to his call, she paused, but did not turn. He came up with her . . . he caught at her robe, soft to the touch as silken gauze, and overwhelmed by a sudden emotion of awe and reverence, he sank on his knees.

“Who, and what are you?” he murmured in trembling tones—“Tell me! If you are

mortal maid I will not harm you I swear! . . . See! . . . I am only a poor crazed fool that loves a Dream, . . . that stakes his life upon a chance of Heaven, . . . pity me as you are gentle! . . . but do not fear me . . . only speak!"

No answer came. He looked up,—and now in the rich radiance of the moon beheld her face . . . how like, and yet how altogether unlike it was to the face of the Angel in his vision! For that ethereal Being had seemed dazzlingly, supremely beautiful beyond all mortal power of description,—whereas this girl was simply fair, small and delicate, with something wistful and pathetic in the lines of her sweet mouth, and shadows as of remembered sorrows slumbering in the depths of her serene dove-like eyes. Her fragile figure drooped wearily as though she were exhausted by some long fatigue, . . . yet, . . . gazing down upon him, she smiled, . . . and in that smile, the faint resemblance she bore to his Spirit-ideal flashed out like a beam of sunlight though it vanished again as quickly as it had shone. He waited eagerly to hear her voice, . . . waited in a sort of breathless suspense,—but as she still kept silence, he sprang up from his kneeling attitude and seized her hands . . . how soft they were and warm!—he folded them in his own and drew her closer

to himself . . . the flowers she held fell from her grasp, and lay in a tumbled fragrant heap between them. His brain was in a whirl—the Past and the Future—the Real and the Unreal—the Finite and the Infinite—seemed all merging into one another without any shade of difference or division!

“We have met very strangely, you and I!”—he said, scarcely conscious of the words he uttered—“Will you not tell me your name?”

A faint sigh escaped her.

“My name is Edris,” she answered, in low musical accents, that carried to his sense of hearing a suggestion of something sweet and familiar.

“Edris!” he repeated—“Edris!” and gazing at her dreamily, he raised her hands to his lips and kissed them gently—“My fairest Edris! From whence do you come?”

She met his eyes with a mild look of reproach and wonderment.

“From a far far country, Theos!” and he started as she thus addressed him—“A land where no love is wasted and no promise forgotten!”

Again that mystic light passed over her pale face—the blossom-coral she wore seemed for

a moment to glitter like a circlet of stars. His heart beat quickly—could he believe her?.. was she in very truth that shining Peri whose aerial loveliness had so long haunted his imagination? Nay!—it was impossible!.. for if she were, why should she veil her native glory in such simple maiden guise?

Searchingly he studied every feature of her countenance, and as he did so, his doubts concerning her spirit-origin became more and more confirmed. She was a living breathing woman—an actual creature of flesh and blood,—yet how account for her appearance on the field of Ardath? This puzzled him.. till all at once a logical explanation of the whole mystery dawned upon his mind. Heliobas had sent her hither on purpose to meet him! Of course! how dense he had been not to see through so transparent a scheme before! The clever Chaldean had resolved that he, Theos Alwyn, should somehow be brought to accept his trance as a real experience, so that henceforth his faith in “things unseen and eternal” might be assured. Many psychological theorists would uphold such a deceit as not only permissible, but even praiseworthy, if practised for the furtherance of a good cause. Even the venerable hermit Elzéar might have shared in the con-

spiracy, and this 'Edris' as she called herself was no doubt perfectly trained in the part she had to play! A plot for his conversion!... well!.. he would enter into it himself, he resolved!... why not? The girl was exquisitely fair,—a veritable Psyche of soft charms!—and a little love-making by moonlight would do no harm, here he suddenly became aware that while these thoughts were passing through his brain he had unconsciously allowed her hands to slip from his hold, and she now stood apart at some little distance, her eyes fixed full upon him with an expression of most plaintive piteousness. He made a hasty step or two towards her,—and as he did so, his pulses began to throb with an extraordinary sensation of pleasure,—pleasure so keen as to be almost pain.

"Edris!".. he whispered,—“Edris . . .” and stopped irresolutely.

She looked up at him with the appealing wistfulness of a lost and suffering child, and a slight shudder ran through all her delicate frame.

“I am cold, Theos!” she murmured half beseechingly, stretching out her hands to him once more,—hands as fine and fair as lily-leaves,—little white hands which he gazed at

wonderingly, yet did not take . . . “Cold and very weary! The way has been long, and the earth is dark!”

“Dark?” repeated Alwyn mechanically, still absorbed in the dubious contemplation of her lovely yielding form, her sweet upturned face and gold-glistening hair—“Dark? . . . here? . . . beneath the brightness of the moon? Nay,—I have seen many a full day look less radiant than this night of stars!”

Her eyes dwelt upon him with a certain pathetic bewilderment,—she let her extended arms drop wearily at her sides, and a shadow of pained recollection crossed the fairness of her features.

“Ah, I forgot! . . .” and she sighed deeply—“This is that strange, sad world, where Darkness is called Light.”

At these words, uttered with so much sorrowful meaning, a quick thrill stirred Alwyn’s blood,—an inexplicable sharp thrill, that was like the touch of scorching flame. He gazed at her perplexedly . . . his pride resented what he imagined to be the deception practised upon him, but at the same time he was not insensible to the weird romance of the situation.

He began to consider that as this fair girl, trained so admirably in mystical speech and

manner had evidently been sent on purpose to meet him, he could scarcely be blamed for taking her as she presented herself, and enjoying to the full a thoroughly novel and picturesque adventure.

His eyes flashed as he surveyed her standing there before him, utterly unprotected and at his mercy—his old, languid, sceptical smile played on his proud lips,—that smile of the marble Antinous which says “Bring me face to face with Truth itself and I shall still doubt!” . . . An expression of reluctant admiration and awakening passion dawned on his countenance, . . . he was about to speak,—when she whose looks were fastened on him with intense, powerful, watchful, anxious entreaty, suddenly wrung her hands together as though in despair, and gave vent to a desolate sobbing cry that smote him to the very heart.

“Theos! Theos!” and her voice pealed out on the breathless air in sweet melodious broken echoes. . . “Oh my unfaithful Belovéd, what can I do for thee! A love unseen thou wilt not understand,—a love made manifest thou wilt not recognise! Alas!—my journey is in vain . . . my errand hopeless! For while thine unbelief resists my pleading, how can I lead thee from danger into safety? . . . how bridge the

depths between our parted souls?.. how win for thee pardon and blessing from Christ the King!"

Bright tears filled her eyes and fell fast and thick through her long drooping lashes, and Alwyn smitten with remorse at the sight of such grief, sprang to her side overcome by shame, love, and penitence.

"Weeping?.. and for me?"—he exclaimed—"Sweet Edris!.. Gentlest of maidens!.. Weep not for one unworthy, . but rather smile and speak again of love!..." and now his words pouring forth impetuously, seemed to utter themselves independently of any previous thought,—“Yes!. speak only of love,—and the discourse of those tuneful lips shall be my gospel, . the glance of those soft eyes my creed, .. and as for pardon and blessing I crave none but thine! I sought a Dream.. I have found a fair Reality, .. a living proof of Love's divine omnipotence! Love is the only god—who would doubt his sovereignty, or grudge him his full measure of worship?.. Not I, believe me!"—and carried away by the force of a resistless inward fervour, he threw himself once more at her feet—"See!—here do I pay my vows at Love's high altar!—heart's desire shall be the prayer—

heart's ecstasy the praise! . . . together we will celebrate our glad service of love, and Heaven itself shall sanctify this Eve of St. Edris and All Angels!"

She listened,—looking down upon him with grave half timid tenderness,—her tears dried, and a sudden hope irradiated her fair face with a soft bright flush, as lovely as the light of morning falling on newly opened flowers. When he ceased, she spoke—her accents breaking through the silence like clear notes of music sweetly sung.

"So be it!" she said . . . "May Heaven truly sanctify all pure thoughts, and free the soul of my Belovéd from sin!"

And slowly bending forward, as a delicate iris-blossom bends to the sway of the wind, she laid her hands about his neck, and touched his lips with her own. . . .

Ah! . . . what divine ecstasy,—what wild and fiery transport filled him then! . . . Her kiss, like a penetrating lightning-flash, pierced to the very centre of his being,—the moonbeams swam round him in eddying circles of gold—the white field heaved to and fro, . . . he caught her waist and clung to her, and in the burning marvel of that moment he forgot everything, save that, whether spirit or mortal, she was in

woman's witching shape, and that all the glamour of her beauty was his for this one night at least, . this night which now in the speechless glorious delirium of love that overwhelmed him, seemed like the Mahometan's night of Al-Kadr "better than a thousand months!"

Drawn to her by some subtle mysterious attraction which he could neither explain nor control, and absorbed in a rapture beyond all that his highest and most daring flights of poetical fancy had ever conceived, he felt as though his very life were ebbing out of him to become part of hers, and this thought was strangely sweet,—a perfect consummation of all his best desires! . . .

All at once a cold shudder ran freezingly through his veins,—a something chill and impalpable appeared to pass between him and her caressing arms—his limbs grew numb and heavy—his sight began to fail him he was sinking . . . sinking, he knew not where, when suddenly she withdrew herself from his embrace. Instantly his strength came back to him with a rush—he sprang to his feet and stood erect, breathless, dizzy and confused—his pulses beating like hammer-strokes and every fibre in his frame quivering with excitement.

GOD'S MAIDEN EDRIS.

Entranced, impassioned, elated,—filled with unutterable, incomprehensible joy, he would have clasped her again to his heart,—but she retreated swiftly from him, and standing several paces off, motioned him not to approach her more nearly. He scarcely heeded her warning gesture, . . . plunging recklessly through the flowers he had almost reached her side, when to his amazement and fear, his eager progress was stopped!

Stopped by some invisible intangible barrier, which despite all his efforts, forcibly prevented him from advancing one step further,—she was close within an arm's length of him—and yet he could not touch her! . . . Nothing apparently divided them, save a small breadth of the Ardath blossoms gleaming ivory-soft in the moonlight . . . nevertheless that invincible influence thrust him back and held him fast as though he were chained to the ground with weights of iron!

“Edris!” . he cried loudly, his former transport of delight changed into agony . . . “Edris! . . . Come to me! I cannot come to you! What is this that parts us?”

“Death!” she answered . . . and the solemn word seemed to toll slowly through the still air like a knell.

He stood bewildered and dismayed. Death? What could she mean? What in the name of all her beautiful, delicate, glowing youth, had she to do with death? Gazing at her in mute wonder, he saw her stoop and gather one flower from the clusters growing thickly around her—she held it shield-wise against her breast where it shone like a large white jewel, and regarded him with sweet wistful eyes full of a mournful longing.

“Death lies between us, my Belovéd!” she continued—“One line of shadow . . . only one little line! But thou mayest not pass it save when God commands,—and I—I cannot! For I know naught of death, . . . save that it is a heavy dreamless sleep allotted to over-wearied mortals, wherein they gain brief rest 'twixt many lives,—lives that like recurring dawns, rouse them anew to labour. How often hast thou slept thus, my Theos, and forgotten me!”

She paused, . . . and Alwyn met her clear steadfast looks with a swift glance of something like defiance. For as she spoke, his previous idea concerning her came back upon him with redoubled force. He was keenly conscious of the vehement fever of love into which her presence had thrown

him,—but all the same he was unable to dispossess himself of the notion that she was a pupil and an accomplice of Heliobas, thoroughly trained and practised in his mysterious doctrine, and that therefore she most probably had some magnetic power in herself, that at her pleasure not only attracted him *to* her, but also held him thus motionless at a distance *from* her.

She talked, of course, in an indefinite mystic way either to intimidate or convince him . . . but, . . . and he smiled a little . . . in any case it only rested with himself to unmask this graceful pretender to angelic honours! And while he thought thus, her soft tones trembled on the silence again, . . . he listened as a dreaming mariner might listen to the fancied singing of the sea-fairies.

“Through long bright aeons of endless glory,” she said—“I have waited and prayed for thee! I have pleaded thy cause before the blinding splendours of God’s Throne I have sung thee songs of thy native Paradise, but thou grown dull of hearing, hast caught but the echo of the music! Life after life hast thou lived, and given no thought to me—yet I remember and am faithful! Heaven is not all Heaven to me

without thee my Belovéd, . . . and now in this time of thy last probation, . . . now, if thou lovest me indeed”

“Love thee?” suddenly exclaimed Theos, half beside himself with the strange passion of yearning her words awakened in him—“Love thee, Edris?—Aye!. as the gods loved when earth was young!. with the fulness of the heart and the vigour of glad life .even so I love thee! What sayest thou of Heaven?. Heaven is here—here on this bridal field of Ardath, o’er-canopied with stars! Come, sweet one, . cease to play this mystic midnight fantasy—I have done with dreams! Edris, be thyself!. for thou art Woman, not Angel—thy kiss was warm as wine! Nay, why shrink from me?.” this, as she retreated still further away, her eyes flashing with unearthly brilliancy, . “I will make thee a queen, fair Edris, as poets ever make queens of the women they love,—my fame shall be a crown for thee to wear,—a crown that the whole world, gazing on, shall envy!”

And in the heat and ardour of the moment, forgetful of the unseen barrier that divided her from him, he made a violent effort to spring forward—when lo! a wave of rippling light appeared to break from beneath her

feet, . it rolled towards him, and completely flooded the space between them like a glittering pool,—and in it the flowers of Ardath swayed to and fro as water-lilies on a woodland lake sway to the measured dash of passing oars! Starting back with a cry of terror, he gazed wildly on this miracle,—a voice richer than all music rang silvery clear across the liquid radiance.

“Fame!” said the voice . . . “Wouldst thou crown Me, Theos, with so perishable a diadem?”

Paralysed and speechless, he lifted his straining dazzled eyes — was *that* Edris? — that lustrous Figure, delicate as a sea-mist with the sun shining through? He stared upon her as a dying man might stare for the last time on the face of his nearest and dearest, . . . he saw her soft grey garments change to glistening white, . . . the wreath she wore sparkled as with a million dewdrops . . a roseate halo streamed above her and around her,—long streaks of crimson flared down the sky like threads of fire swung from the stars,—and in the deepening glory, her countenance, divinely beautiful, yet intensely sad, expressed the touching hope and fear of one who makes a final farewell appeal. Ah God! . . he knew her now! . . too late, too

late he knew her!.. the Angel of his vision stood before him!.. and humbled to the very dust and ashes of despair he loathed himself for his unworthiness and lack of faith!

“O doubting and unhappy one!” she went on, in accents sweeter than a chime of golden bells—“Thou art lost in the gloom of the Sorrowful Star where naught is known of Life save its Shadow! Lost!.. and as yet I cannot rescue thee—ah! forlorn Edris that I am, left lonely up in heaven! But prayers are heard, and God’s great patience never tires,—learn therefore ‘*from the perils of the past, the perils of the future*’—and weigh against an immortal destiny of Love the worth of Fame!”

Wider and more dazzling grew the brilliancy surrounding her—raising her eyes, she clasped her hands in an attitude of impassioned supplication

“Oh fair King Christ!” she cried, and her voice seemed to strike a melodious passage through the air.. “THOU canst prevail!” A burst of music answered her, .. music that rushed wind-like downwards and swept in strong vibrating chords over the land,—again the “*Kyrie eleison! Christe eleison! Kyrie eleison!*” pealed forth in the same full youthful-toned chorus that had before sounded

so mysteriously outside Elzéar's hermitage—and the separate crimson rays glittering aurora-wise about her radiant figure, suddenly melted all together in the form of a great Cross, which, absorbing moon and stars in its fiery redness, blazed from end to end of the eastern horizon!

Then, like a fair white dove or delicate butterfly she rose . . . she poised herself above the bowing Ardath bloom anon, soaring aloft, she floated higher . . . higher! . . . and ever higher, serenely and with aerial slow ease,—till, drawn into the glory of that wondrous flaming Cross whose outstretched beams seemed waiting to receive her,—she drifted straight upwards through its very centre . . . and so vanished!

Theos stared aghast at the glowing sky.. whither had she gone? Her words still rang in his ears,—the warmth of her kiss still lingered on his lips,—.. he loved her!.. he worshipped her! . . . why, why had she left him “lost” as she herself had said, in a world that was mere emptiness without her? He struggled for utterance . . .

“Edris!..!” he whispered hoarsely—“Edris! . . . My Angel-love! . . . come back! Come back . . . pity me! . . . forgive! . . . Edris!”

ARDATH.

His voice died in a hard sob of imploring agony,—smitten to the very soul by a remorse greater than he could bear, his strength failed him, and he fell senseless, face forward among the flowers of the Prophet's field; . . . flowers, that, circling snowily around his dark and prostrate form, looked like fairy garlands bordering a Poet's Grave!



PART II.
IN AL-KYRIS.

“ That which hath been, is now : and that which is to be, hath already been ; . . and God requireth that which is past ! ”

ECCLESIASTES.



CHAPTER I.

THE MARVELLOUS CITY.

PROFOUND silence, — profound unconsciousness,—oblivious rest! Such are the soothing ministrations of kindly Nature to the overburdened spirit;—Nature who in her tender wisdom and maternal solicitude will not permit us to suffer beyond a certain limit. Excessive pain, whether it be physical or mental cannot last long,—and human anguish wound up to its utmost quivering-pitch, finds at the very height of desolation, a strange hushing, Lethean calm. Even so it was with Theos Alwyn,—drowned in the deep stillness of a merciful swoon, he had sunk, as it were, out of life,—far out of the furthest reach or sense of time, in some vast unsounded gulf of shadows where earth and heaven were alike forgotten!

How long he lay thus he never knew,—but

he was roused at last . . . roused by the pressure of something cold and sharp against his throat, . . . and on languidly opening his eyes he found himself surrounded by a small body of men in armour, who, leaning on tall pikes which glistened brilliantly in the full sunlight, surveyed him with looks of derisive amusement. One of these, closer to him than the rest, and who seemed from his dress and bearing to be some officer in authority, held instead of a pike a short sword, the touch of whose pointed steel blade had been the effectual means of awakening him from his lethargy.

“How now!” said this personage in a rough voice as he withdrew his weapon—“What idle fellow art thou? . . . Traitor or spy? Fool thou must be, and breaker of the King’s law, . . . else thou hadst never dared to bask in such swine-like ease ’outside the gates of Al-Kyris the Magnificent!”

Al-Kyris the Magnificent! What was the man talking about? Uttering a hasty exclamation, Alwyn staggered to his feet with an effort, and shading his eyes from the hot glare of the sun, stared bewilderedly at his interlocutor.

“What . . . what is this?” he stammered dreamily—“I do not understand you! I . . . I have slept on the field of Ardath!”

The soldiers burst into a loud laugh, in which their leader joined.

“Thou hast drunk deep, my friend!” he observed, putting up his sword with a sharp clatter into its shining sheath,—“What name sayest thou? . . . *Ardath*? We know it not, nor dost thou, I warrant, when sober! Go to,—make for thy home speedily! Aye, aye! the flavour of good wine clings to thy mouth still,—’tis a pleasant sweetness that I myself am partial to, and I can pardon those who, like thee, love it somewhat too well! Away!—and thank the gods thou hast fallen into the hands of the king’s guard, rather than Lysia’s priestly Patrol! See! the gates are open,—in with thee! and cool thy head at the first fountain!”

“The gates!”... What gates? Removing his hand from his eyes Alwyn gazed around confusedly. He was standing on an open stretch of level road, dustily white and dry with long-continued heat,—and right in front of him was an enormously high wall, topped with rows of bristling iron spikes, and guarded by the gates alluded to,—huge massive portals seemingly made of finely moulded brass, and embellished on either side by thick, round, stone watch-towers, from whose summits scarlet pennons drooped idly in the windless air. Amazed,

and full of a vague trembling terror, he fixed his wondering looks once more upon his strange companions who in their turn regarded him with cool military indifference.

“I must be mad or dreaming!” he thought,—then growing suddenly desperate he stretched out his hands with a wild appealing gesture—

“I swear to you I know nothing of this place!” he cried—“I never saw it before! Some trick has been played on me... who brought me here? Where is Elzéar the hermit?... the Ruins of Babylon?... where is, Good God!.. what fearful freak of fate is this!”

The soldiers laughed again,—their commander looked at him a little curiously.

“Nay, art *thou* one of the escaped of Lysia’s lovers?” he asked suspiciously—“And has the Silver Nectar failed of its usual action, and driven thy senses to the winds, that thou ravest thus? For if thou art a stranger and knowest naught of us, how speakest thou our language?... Why wearest thou the garb of our citizens?”

Alwyn shrank and shivered as though he had received a deadening blow,—an awful, inexplicable chill horror froze his blood. It was

true! . . he understood the language spoken! . . . it was perfectly familiar to him,—more so than his own native tongue,—stop! what *was* his native tongue?

He tried to think—and the sick fear at his heart grew stronger,—he could not remember a word of it! And his dress! . . he glanced at it dismayed and appalled,—he had not noticed it till now. It bore some resemblance to the costume of ancient Greece, and consisted of a white linen tunic and loose upper vest, both garments being kept in place by a belt of silver. From this belt depended a sheathed dagger, a square writing tablet, and a pencil-shaped implement which he immediately recognised as the antique form of stylus. His feet were shod with sandals,—his arms were bare to the shoulder, and clasped at the upper part by two broad silver armlets richly chased.

Noting all these details, the fantastic awfulness of his position smote him with redoubled force,—and he felt as a madman may feel when his impending doom has not entirely asserted itself,—when only grotesque and leering suggestions of madness cloud his brain,—when hideous faces dimly discerned, loom out of the chaos of his nightly visions,—and when all the air seems solid darkness with one white line

of fire cracking it asunder in the midst, and that the fire of his own approaching frenzy. Such a delirium of agony possessed Alwyn at that moment,—he could have shrieked, laughed, groaned, wept, and fallen down in the dust before these bearded armed men, praying them to slay him with their weapons there where he stood, and put him mercifully and at once out of his mysterious misery! But an invisible influence stronger than himself, prevented him from becoming altogether the victim of his own torturing emotions, and he remained erect and still as a marble figure, with a wondering white piteous face of such unutterable affliction that the officer who watched him seemed touched, and advancing, clapped his shoulder in a friendly manner.

“Come, come!” he said—“Thou need’st fear nothing,—we are not the men to blab of thy trespass against the city’s edict,—for of a truth, there is too much whispering away of young and goodly lives now-a-days. What!—thou art not the first gay gallant, nor wilt thou be the last, that has seen the world turn upside down in a haze of love and late feasting! If thou hast not slept long enough, why sleep again an hour out not here . . .”

He broke it abruptly,—a distant clatter of

THE MARVELLOUS CITY.

horses' hoofs was heard as of one galloping at full speed. The soldiers started, and assumed an attitude of attention,—their leader muttered something like an oath, and seizing Alwyn by the arm, hurried him to the brazen gates which, as he had said, stood open, and literally thrust him through.

“In, in, my lad!” he urged with rough kindness,—“Thou hast a face fairer than that of the King's own minstrel, and why wouldst thou die for sake of an extra cup of wine? If Lysia is to blame for this scattering of thy wits, take heed thou do not venture near her more—it is ill jesting with the Serpent's sting! Get thee hence quickly, and be glad of thy life,—thou hast many years before thee yet in which to play the lover and fool!”

With this enigmatical speech he signed to his men to follow him,—they all filed through the gates, which closed after them with a jarring clang, a dark bearded face peered out of a narrow loop-hole in one of the watch-towers, and a deep voice called . .

“What of the hour?”

The officer raised his gauntleted hand, and answered promptly—

“Peace and safe”

“Salutation!” cried voice again.

“Salutation!” responded the officer, and with a reassuring nod and smile to the bewildered Alwyn, he gathered his little band around him, and they all marched off, the measured clink-clank of their footsteps making metallic music, as they wheeled round a corner and disappeared from sight.

Left to himself Alwyn’s first idea was to sit down in some quiet corner, and endeavour calmly to realize what strange and cruel thing had chanced to him. But happening to look up, he saw the bearded face in the watch-tower observing him suspiciously,—he therefore roused himself sufficiently to walk away, on and on, scarce heeding whither he went, till he had completely lost sight of those great gold-glittering portals which had shut him, against his will, within the walls of a large, splendid and populous City. Yes!.. hopelessly perplexing and maddening as it was, there could be no doubt of this fact,—and though he again and again tried to convince himself that he was labouring under some wild and exceptional hallucination, his senses all gave evidence of the actual reality of his situation,—he felt, he moved, he heard, he saw, . . . he was even beginning to be conscious of hunger, thirst and fatigue.

THE MARVELLOUS CITY.

The further he went, the more gorgeous grew the surroundings, . . . his unguided steps wandered as it seemed, of their own accord, into wide streets, paved entirely with mosaics, and lined on both sides with lofty, picturesque and palace-like buildings,—he crossed and re-crossed broad avenues, shaded by tall feathery palms, and masses of graceful flowering foliage,—he passed rows upon rows of brilliant shops whose frontages glittered with the most costly and beautiful wares of every description,—and as he strolled about aimlessly, uncertain whither to go, he was constantly jostled by the pressing throngs of people that crowded the thoroughfares, all more or less apparently bent on pleasure, to judge from their animated countenances and frequent bursts of gay laughter.

The men were for the most part arrayed like himself,—though here and there he met some few whose garments were of soft silk instead of linen, who wore gold belts in place of silver, and who carried their daggers in sheaths that were literally encrusted all over with flashing jewels.

As he advanced more into the city's centre, the crowds increased,—so much so that the noise of traffic and clatter of tongues became quite deafening to his ears. Richly ornamented

chariots drawn by spirited horses, and driven by personages whose attire seemed to be a positive blaze of gold and gems, rolled past in a continuous procession,—fruit sellers, carrying their lovely luscious merchandise in huge gilded moss-wreathed baskets, stood at almost every corner,—flower-girls, fair as flowers, bore aloft in their gracefully upraised arms wide wicker trays, overflowing with odorous blossoms tied into clusters and wreaths,—and there were countless numbers of curious little open square carts to which mules, wearing collars of bells, were harnessed, the tinkle-tinkle of their constant passage through the throng making incessant merry music. These vehicles bore the names of traders,—purveyors in wine and dealers in all sorts of provisions,—but with the exception of such necessary business caterers, the streets were full of elegant loungers of both sexes, who seemed to have nothing whatever to do but amuse themselves.

The women were especially noticeable for their lazy grace of manner,—they glided to and fro with an indolent floating ease that was indescribably bewitching,—the more so as many of them were endowed with exquisite beauty of form and feature,—beauty greatly

THE MARVELLOUS CITY.

enhanced by the artistic simplicity of their costume.

This was composed of a straight clinging gown, slightly gathered at the throat, and bound about the waist with a twisted girdle of silver, gold, and, in some cases, jewels,—their arms, like those of the men, were bare, and their small delicate feet were protected by sandals fastened with crossed bands of ribbon coquetishly knotted. The arrangement of their hair was evidently a matter of personal taste, and not the slavish copying of any set fashion,—some allowed it to hang in loosely flowing abundance over their shoulders,—others had it closely braided, or coiled carelessly in a thick soft mass at the top of the head,—but all without exception wore white veils,—veils, long, transparent and filmy as gossamer, which they flung back or draped about them at their pleasure. . . . and presently, after watching several of these fairy creatures pass by and listening to their low laughter and dulcet speech, a sudden memory leaped into Alwyn's confused brain,—an old old memory that seemed to have lain hidden among his thoughts for centuries,—the memory of a story called "LAMIA" told in verse as delicious as music aptly played. Who wrote the story?.. He

could not tell,—but he recollected that it was about a snake in the guise of a beautiful woman. And these women in this strange city looked as if they also had a snake-like origin,—there was something so soft and lithe and undulating about their movements and gestures. Weary of walking, distracted by the ever-increasing clamour, and feeling lost among the crowd, he at last perceived a wide and splendid Square, surrounded with stately houses, and having in its centre a huge white granite Obelisk which towered like a pillar of snow against the dense blue of the sky. Below it a massively sculptured Lion, also of white granite, lay couchant, holding a shield between its paws,—and on either side two fine fountains were in full play, the delicate spiral columns of water being dashed up beyond the extreme point of the obelisk so that its stone face was wet and glistening with the tossing rainbow shower.

Here he turned aside out of the main thoroughfare,—there were tall shady trees all about, and fantastically carved benches underneath them, . . he determined to sit down and rest, and steadily *think out* his involved and peculiar condition of mind.

As he passed the sculptured lion, he saw

certain words engraved on the shield it held,—they were.. “*Through the Lion and the Serpent shall Al-Kyris flourish*”

There was no disorder in his intelligence concerning this sentence,—he was able to read it clearly and comprehensively,.. and yet... *what* was the language in which it was written, and how did he come to know it so thoroughly? ... With a sigh that was almost a groan, he sank listlessly on a seat, and burying his head in his hands to shut out all the strange sights which so direfully perplexed his reason, he began to subject himself to a patient, serious cross-examination.

In the first place.. *Who was he?* Part of the required answer came readily,—*Theos*. *Theos* what? His brain refused to clear up this point,—it repeated *Theos—Theos*,—over and over again, but no more!

Shuddering with a vague dread, he asked himself the next question,.... *From whence had he come?* The reply was direct and decisive—*From Ardath*.

But what was *Ardath*? It was neither a country nor a city—it was a ‘waste field,’ where he had seen.... ah! *Whom* had he seen? He struggled furiously with himself for some response to this,.. none came! Total dumb

blankness was the sole result of the inward rack to which he subjected his thoughts!

And where had he been before he ever saw Ardath?.. had he *no* recollection of any other place, any other surroundings?—*Absolutely none!*—torture his wits as he would,—*absolutely none!*... This was frightful... incredible!.. Surely, surely, he mused piteously, there *must* have been something in his life before the name of 'Ardath' had swamped his intelligence!..

He lifted his head,.. his face had grown ashen-grey and rigid in the deep extremity of his speechless trouble and terror,—there was a sick faintness at his heart, and rising, he moved unsteadily to one of the great fountains, and there dipping his hands in the spray, he dashed some drops on his brow and eyes. Then, making a cup of his hollowed palms, he drank thirstily several draughts of the cool sweet water,—it seemed to allay the fever in his blood.....

He looked around him with a wild vague smile,—Al-Kyris!... of course!... he was in Al-Kyris!—why was he so distressed about it? It was a pleasant city,—there was much to see,—and also much to learn!..... At that instant a loud blast of silver-toned trumpets split the air, followed by a storm-roar of distant

acclamation surging up from thousands of throats,—crowds of men and women suddenly flocked into the Square, across it, and out of it again, all pressing impetuously in one direction,—and urged forward by the general rush as well as by a corresponding impulse within himself, he flung all meditation to the winds, and plunged recklessly into the shouting on-sweeping throng. He was borne swiftly with it down a broad avenue lined with grand old trees and decked with flying flags and streamers, to the margin of a noble river, as still as liquid amber in the wide sheen and heat of the noon-day sun. A splendid marble embankment, adorned with colossal statues, girdled it on both sides,—and here, under silken awnings of every colour, pattern and design, an enormous multitude was assembled,—its white-attired closely-packed ranks stretching far away into the blue distance on either hand.

All the attention of this vast concourse appeared to be centred on the slow approach of a strange gilded vessel, that with great curved prow and scarlet sails flapping idly in the faint breeze, was gliding leisurely yet majestically over the azure blaze of the smooth water. Huge oars like golden fins projected

from her sides and dipped lazily every now and then, apparently wielded by the hands of invisible rowers, whose united forces supplied the lack of the needful wind,—and as he caught sight of this cumbrously quaint galley, Theos, moved by sudden interest, elbowed his way resolutely through the dense crowd till he gained the edge of the embankment, where leaning against the marble balustrade, he watched with a curious fascination its gradual advance.

Nearer and nearer it came, . . . brighter and brighter glowed the vivid scarlet of its sails, . . . a solemn sound of stringed music rippled enchantingly over the glassy river, mingling itself with the wild shouting of the populace,—shouting that seemed to rend the hollow vault of heaven! . . . Nearer . . . nearer . . . and now the vessel slid round and curtsied forward, . . . its propelling fins moved more rapidly . . . another graceful sweep,—and lo! it fronted the surging throng like a glittering fantastic Apparition drawn out of dreamland!

Theos stared at it, dazzled and stricken with a half-blind breathless wonder,—was ever a ship like this he thought?—a ship that sparkled all over as though it were carven out of one great burning jewel? Golden hangings,

falling in rich loose folds draped it gorgeously from stem to stern,—gold cordage looped the sails,—on the deck a band of young girls clad in white, and crowned with flowers, knelt, playing softly on quaintly shaped instruments,—and a cluster of tiny, semi-nude boys, fair as young cupids, were grouped in pretty reposeful attitudes along the edge of the gilded prow holding garlands of red and yellow blossoms which trailed down to the surface of the water beneath.

As a half slumbering man may note a sudden brilliant glare of sunshine flashing on the wall of his sleeping-chamber, so Theos at first viewed this floating pageant in confused uncomprehending bewilderment,...when all at once his stupefied senses were roused to hot life and pulsing action,—with a smothered cry of ecstasy he fixed his straining eager gaze on one supreme fair Figure,—the central Glory of the marvellous picture! . . .

A Woman or a Goddess?—a rainbow Flame in mortal shape?—a spirit of earth, air, fire, water?.. or a Thought of Beauty embodied into human sweetness and made perfect?.. Clothed in gold attire, and girdled with gems she stood, leaning indolently against the middle mast of the vessel, her great sombre

dusky eyes resting drowsily on the swarming masses of people, whose frenzied roar of rapture and admiration sounded like the breaking of billows.

Presently, with a slow solemn smile on her haughtily curved lips, she extended one hand and arm, snow-white and glittering with jewels, and made an imperious gesture to command silence. Instantly a profound hush ensued. Lifting a long slender white wand, at the end of which could be plainly seen the gleaming silver head of a Serpent, she described three circles in the air with a perfectly even, majestic motion, and as she did this, her marvellous eyes turned towards Theos, and dwelt steadily upon him.

He met her gaze fully, absorbing into his inmost soul the mesmeric spell of her matchless loveliness,—he saw, without actually realizing the circumstance, that the whole vast multitude around him had fallen prostrate in an attitude of worship,—and still he stood erect, drinking in the warmth of those dark, witching, sleepy orbs that flashed at him half-resentfully, half-mockingly, . . . and then, . . . the beauty-burdened ship began to sway gently, and move onwards,—she, that wondrous Siren-Queen was vanishing,—vanishing!—she and her kneeling

maidens, and music, and flowers,—vanishing...
Where?

With a start he sprang from his post of observation,—he felt he must go after her at all risks,—he must find out her place of abode,—her rank,—her title,—her name! . . . All at once he was roughly seized by a dozen or more of hands,—loud angry voices shouted on all sides . . . “A traitor! . . . a traitor!” . . . “An infidel!”

“A spy!” “A malcontent!”

“Into the river with him!”

“He refuses worship!” “He denies the gods!”

“Bear him to the Tribunal!” . . . And in a trice of time, he was completely surrounded and hemmed in by an exasperated gesticulating crowd, whose ominous looks and indignant mutterings were plainly significant of prompt hostility. With a few agile movements he succeeded in wrenching himself free from the grasp of his assailants, and standing among them like a stag at bay he cried,

“What have I done? How have I offended? Speak! Or is it the fashion of Al-Kyris to condemn a man unheard?”

No one answered this appeal,—the very directness of it seemed to increase the irritation

of the mob, that pressing closer and closer, began to jostle and hustle him in a threatening manner that boded ill for his safety,—he was again taken prisoner, and struggling in the grasp of his captors, he was preparing to fight for his life as best he could, against the general fury, when the sound of musical strings, swept carelessly upwards in the ascending scale, struck sweetly through the clamour. A youth, arrayed in crimson, and carrying a small golden harp, marched sedately between the serried ranks that parted right and left at his approach,—thus clearing the way for another personage who followed him,—a graceful Adonis-like personage in glistening white attire, who wore a myrtle-wreath on his dark abundant locks, and whom the populace,—forgetting for a moment the cause of their recent disturbance,—greeted with a ringing and ecstatic shout of “HAIL SAH-LÛMA!”

Again and again this cry was uplifted, till far away on the extreme outskirts of the throng the joyous echo of it was repeated faintly yet distinctly . . . “HAIL! ALL HAIL, SAH-LÛMA!”





CHAPTER II.

SAH-LÛMA.

THE new-comer thus enthusiastically welcomed, bowed right and left, with a condescending air, in response to the general acclamation, and advancing to the spot where Theos stood, an enforced prisoner in the close grip of three or four able-bodied citizens, he said . . .

“What turbulence is here? By my faith! . . . when I heard the noise of quarrelsome contention jarring the sweetness of this nectarous noon, methought I was no longer in Al-Kyris, but rather in some western city of barbarians where music is but an unvalued name!”

And he smiled—a dazzling child-like smile, half petulant, half pleased,—a smile of supreme self-consciousness as of one who knew his own resistless power to charm away all discord.

Several voices answered him in clamorous unison :

“ A traitor, Sah-lûma ! ” “ A profane rebel ! ” . . . “ An unbeliever ! ” . . . “ A most insolent knave ! ” — “ He refused homage to the High Priestess ! ” . . . “ A renegade from the faith ! ”

“ Now, by the Sacred Veil ! ” cried Sah-lûma impatiently—“ Think ye I can distinguish your jargon, when like ignorant boors ye talk all at once tearing my ears to shreds with such unmelodious tongue-clatter ! Whom have ye seized thus roughly ? . . . Let him stand forth ! ”

At this command, the men who held Theos relaxed their grasp, and he, breathless and burning with indignation at the treatment he had received, shook himself quickly free of all restraint, and sprang forward, confronting his rescuer. There was a brief pause, during which the two surveyed each other with looks of mutual amazement. What mysterious indication of affinity did they read in one another's faces ? . . . Why did they stand motionless, spell-bound and dumb for a while, eyeing half admiringly, half enviously, each other's personal appearance and bearing ? . . .

Undoubtedly a curious, far-off resemblance existed between them,—yet it was a resemblance that had nothing whatever to do with

the actual figure, mien, or countenance. It was that peculiar and often undefinable similarity of expression, which when noticed between two brothers who are otherwise totally unlike, instantly proclaims their relationship.

Theos realized his own superior height and superior muscular development, — but what were these physical advantages compared to the classic perfection of Sah-lûma's beauty?— beauty combining the delicate with the vigorous, such as is shadowed forth in the artist-conceptions of the god Apollo. His features, faultlessly regular, were redeemed from all effeminacy by the ennobling impress of high thought and inward inspiration,—his eyes were dark, with a brilliant under-reflection of steel-grey in them, that at times flashed out like the soft glitter of summer-lightning in the dense purple of an August heaven,—his olive-tinted complexion was flushed warmly with the glow of health,—and he had broad, bold intellectual brows over which the rich hair clustered in luxuriant waves,—hair that was almost black, with here and there a curious fleck of reddish gold brightening its curling masses, as though a stray sunbeam or two had been caught and entangled therein. He was arrayed in a costume of the finest silk,—his armlets, belt, and

dagger-sheath were all of jewels,—and the general brilliancy of his attire was furthermore increased by a finely-worked flexible collar of gold, set with diamonds. The first exchange of wondering glances over, he viewed Theos with a critical, half supercilious air.

“What art thou?” he demanded. . . “What is thy calling?”

Theos hesitated,—then spoke out boldly and unthinkingly—

“I am a Poet!” he said.

A murmur of irrepressible laughter and derision ran through the listening crowd. Sah-lûma’s lip curled haughtily—

“A Poet!” and his fingers played idly with the dagger at his belt—“Nay—not so! There is but one Poet in Al-Kyris, and I am he!”

Theos looked at him steadily,—a subtle sympathy attracted him towards this charming boaster,—involuntarily he smiled, and bent his head courteously.

“I do not seek to figure as your rival. . .” he began.

“Rival!” echoed Sah-lûma—“I have *no* rivals!”

A burst of applause from those nearest to them in the throng, declared the popular ap-

proval of this assertion, and the boy bearing the harp, who had loitered to listen to the conversation, swept the strings of his instrument with a triumphant force and fervour that showed how thoroughly his feelings were in harmony with the expression of his master's sentiments. Sah-lûma conquered with an effort, his momentary irritation, and resumed coldly—

“From whence do you come, fair sir? We should know your name,—*poets* are not so common!” This with an accent of irony.

Taken aback by the question, Theos stood irresolute, and uncertain what to say. For he was afflicted with a strange and terrible malady such as he dimly remembered having heard of, but never expected to suffer from,—a malady in which his memory had become almost a blank as regarded the past events of his life—though every now and then shadowy images of by-gone things flitted across his brain, like the transient reflections of wind-swept clouds on still, translucent water. Presently in the midst of his painful indecision, an answer suggested itself like a whispered hint from some invisible prompter,

“Poets like Sah-lûma are no doubt as rare as nightingales in snow!” he said, with soft

deference, and an increasing sense of tenderness for his haughty, handsome interlocutor—"As for me,—I am but a singer of sad songs that are not worth the hearing! My name is Theos, —I come from far beyond the seas, and am a stranger in Al-Kyris,—therefore if I have erred in aught, I must be blamed for ignorance, not malice!"

As he spoke Sah-lûma regarded him intently, —Theos met his gaze frankly and unflinchingly. Surely there was some singular power of attraction between the two!.. for as their flashing eyes again dwelt earnestly on one another, they both smiled, and Sah-lûma advancing, proffered his hand. Theos at once accepted it, a curious sensation of pleasure tingling through his frame, as he pressed those slender brown fingers in his own cordial clasp.

"A stranger in Al-Kyris?—and from beyond the seas? Then by my life and honour, I ensure thy safety and bid thee welcome! A singer of sad songs? . . . Sad or merry, that thou art a singer at all, makes thee the guest of the King's Laureate!" A look of conscious vanity illumined his face as he thus announced with proud emphasis his own title and claim to distinction. "The brotherhood of poets," he

continued laughingly—"is a mystic and doubtful tie that hath oft been questioned,—but provided they do not, like ill-conditioned wolves, fight each other out of the arena, there should be joy in the relationship." Here, turning full upon the crowd, he lifted his rich melodious voice to higher and more ringing tones—

"It is like you, O hasty and misjudging Kyrisians, that finding a harmless wanderer from far-off lands, present at the pageant of the Midsummer Benediction, ye should pounce upon him, even as kites on a straying sea-bird and maul him with your ruthless talons! Has he broken the law of worship? Ye have broken the law of hospitality! Has he failed to kneel to the passing Ship of the Sun? So have ye failed to handle him with due courtesy! What report shall he bear hence of your gentleness and culture, to those dim and unjoyous shores beyond the grey-green wall of ocean-billows, where the very name of Al-Kyris serves as a symbol for all that is great and wise and wondrous in the whole round circle of the world? Moreover ye know full well that foreigners and sojourners in the city are exempt from worship,—and the king's command is that all such should be well and nobly entertained, to

the end that when they depart they may carry with them a full store of pleasant memories. Hence, scatter-brains, to your homes!—No festival can ye enjoy without a gust of contention!—ye are ill-made instruments all, whose jarring strings even I, crowned Minstrel of the King, can scarce keep one day in happy tune! Look you now! . . . this stranger is my guest! —. Is there a man in Al-Kyris who will treat as an enemy one whom Sah-lûma calls friend?”

A storm of applause followed this little extempore speech,—applause accompanied by an odorous rain of flowers. There were many women in the crowd, and these had pressed eagerly forward to catch every word that dropped from the Poet-Laureate’s mellifluous lips,—now, moved by one common impulse, they hastily snatched off their posies and garlands, and flung them in lavish abundance at his feet. Some of the blossoms chancing to fall on Theos and cling to his garments, he quickly shook them off, and gathering them together, presented them to the personage for whom they were intended. He however gaily rejected them, moving his small sandalled foot playfully among the thick wealth of red and white roses that lay waiting to be crushed beneath his tread.

“Keep thy share!” he said with an amused flash of his glorious eyes. “Such offerings are my daily lot! . . . I can spare thee one handful from the overflowing harvest of my song!”

It was impossible to be offended with such charming self-complacency,—the naïve conceit of the man was as harmless as the delight of a fair girl who has made her first conquest, and Theos smiling, kept the flowers. By this time the surrounding throng had broken up into little knots and groups,—all ill-humour on the part of the populace had completely vanished,—and large numbers were now leaving the embankment and dispersing in different directions to their several homes. All those who had been within hearing distance of Sah-lûma’s voice appeared highly elated, as though they had enjoyed some special privilege and pleasure, . . . to be reproved by the Laureate was evidently considered better than being praised by any one else. Many persons pressed up to Theos, and shaking hands with him, offered their eager excuses and apologies for the misunderstanding that had lately taken place, explaining with much animation both of look and gesture, that the fact of his wearing the same style of dress as themselves, had induced them to take it

for granted that he must be one of their fellow-citizens, and therefore subject to the laws of the realm. Theos was just beginning to feel somewhat embarrassed by the excessive politeness and cordiality of his recent antagonists, when Sah-lûma, again interposing, cut all explanations short.

“Come, come! cease this useless prating!” he said imperatively yet good-naturedly—“In everything ye showed your dullard ignorance and lack of discernment. For, concerning the matter of attire, are not the fashions of Al-Kyris copied more or less badly in every quarter of the habitable globe?—even as our language and literature form the chief study and delight of all scholars and educated gentlemen? . A truce to your discussions!—Let us get hence and home;”—here he turned to Theos with a graceful salutation—“You, my good friend, will doubtless be glad to rest and recover from my countrymen’s ungentle treatment of your person.”

Thus saying, he made a slight commanding sign,—the clustering people drew back on either side,—and he, taking Theos by the arm, passed through their ranks, talking, laughing, and nodding graciously here and there as he went, with the half kindly, half indifferent ease

of an affable monarch who occasionally bows to some of his poorest subjects. As he trod over the flowers that lay heaped about his path, several girls rushed impetuously forward, struggling with each other for possession of those particularly favoured blossoms that had received the pressure of his foot, and kissing them, they tied them in little knots, and pinned them proudly on the bosoms of their white gowns.

One or two, more daring, stretched out their hands to touch the golden frame of the harp as it was carried past them by the youth in crimson,—a pretty fellow enough, who looked extremely haughty, and almost indignant at this effrontery on the part of the fair poet-worshippers, but he made no remonstrance, and merely held his head a little higher and walked with a more consequential air, as he followed his master at a respectful distance. Another long ecstatic shout of “Hail Sah-lûma!” arose on all sides, rippling away,—away,—down, as it seemed, to the very furthest edge of echoing resonance,—and then the remainder of the crowd quickly scattered right and left, leaving the spacious embankment almost deserted, save for the presence of several copper-coloured blue-shirted individuals

who were commencing the work of taking down and rolling up the silken awnings, accompanying their labours by a sort of monotonous chant, that, mingling with the slow gliding splash of the river, sounded as weird and mournful as the sough of the wind through leafless trees.

Meanwhile Theos, in the company of his new friend, began to express his thanks for the timely rescue he had received,—but Sah-lûma waived all such acknowledgments aside.

“Nay, I have only served thee as a crowned Laureate should ever serve a lesser minstrel”—he said, with that indescribably delicious air of self-flattery which was so whimsical, and yet so winning,—“And I tell thee in all good faith, that for a newly arrived visitor in Al-Kyris, thy first venture was a reckless one! To omit to kneel in the presence of the High Priestess during her Benediction, was a violation of our customs and ceremonies dangerous to life and limb! A religiously excited mob is merciless,—and if I had not chanced upon the scene of action . . . ,”

“I should have been no longer the man I am!” smiled Theos, looking down on his companion’s light, lithe, elegant form as it moved gracefully by his side—“But that I

failed in homage to the High Priestess was a most unintentional lack of wit on my part,—for if *that* was the High Priestess,—that dazzling wonder of beauty who lately passed in a glittering ship, on her triumphant way down the river, like a priceless pearl in a cup of gold”

“Aye, aye!” and Sah-lûma’s dark brows contracted in a slight frown—“Not so many fine words, I pray thee! Thou couldst not well mistake her;—there is only one Lysia!”

“*Lysia!*” murmured Theos dreamily, and the musical name slid off his lips with a soft sibilant sound,—“Lysia! And I forgot to kneel to that enchanting, that adorable being! Oh unwise, benighted fool!—where were my thoughts? Next time I see her I will atone! . —no matter what creed she represents,—I will kiss the dust at her feet, and so make reparation for my sin!”

Sah-lûma glanced at him with a somewhat dubious expression.

“What!—art thou already persuaded?” he queried lightly, “and wilt thou also be one of us? Well, thou wilt need to kiss the dust in very truth, if thou servest Lysia, . . no half-measures will suit where she, the Untouched and Immaculate is concerned,”—and here there

was a faint inflection of mingled mockery and sadness in his tone—"To love her is, for many men, an absolute necessity,—but the Virgin Priestess of the Sun and the Serpent receives love, as statues may receive it,—moving all others to frenzy, she is herself unmoved!"

Theos listened, scarcely hearing. He was studying every line in Sah-lûma's face and figure with fixed and wistful attention. Almost unconsciously he pressed the arm he held, and Sah-lûma looked up at him with a half smile.

"I fancy we shall like each other!" he said—"Thou art a western singing bird-of-passage, and I a nested nightingale amid the roses of the East,—our ways of making melody are different,—we shall not quarrel!"

"Quarrel!" echoed Theos amazedly—"Nay! . . . I might quarrel with my nearest and dearest, but never with thee, Sah-lûma! For I know thee for a very Prince of Poets! . . . and would as soon profane the sanctity of the Muse herself, as violate thy proffered friendship!"

"Why, so!" returned Sah-lûma, his brilliant eyes flashing with undisguised pleasure,—
"An' thou thinkest thus of me we shall be firm and fast companions! Thou hast spoken well

and not without good instruction—I perceive my fame hath reached thee in thine own ocean-girdled lands, where music is as rare as sunshine. Right glad am I that chance has thrown us together, for now thou wilt be better able to judge of my unrivalled master-skill in sweet word-weaving! Thou must abide with me for all the days of thy sojourn here, . . . Art willing?”

“Willing? . . . Aye! more than willing!” exclaimed Theos enthusiastically—“But,—if I burden hospitality . . .”

“Burden!” and Sah-lûma laughed—“Talk not of burdens to me!—I, who have feasted kings, and made light of their entertaining! Here,” he added as he led the way through a broad alley, lined with magnificent palms—“here is the entrance to my poor dwelling!” and a sparkling mischievous smile brightened his features.—“There is room enough in it, methinks to hold thee, even if thou hadst brought a retinue of slaves!”

He pointed before him as he spoke, and Theos stood for a moment stock-still and overcome with astonishment, at the size and splendour of the palace whose gates they were just approaching. It was a dome-shaped building of the purest white marble, surrounded on all sides by long fluted colonnades, and fronted by a spacious

court paved with mosaics, where eight flower-bordered fountains dashed up to the hot blue sky, incessant showers of refreshing spray.

Into this court and across it, Sah-lûma led his wondering guest, . . . ascending a wide flight of steps, they entered a vast open hall, where the light poured in through rose-coloured and pale blue glass, that gave a strange, yet lovely effect of mingled sunset and moon-light to the scene. Here,—reclining about on cushions of silk and velvet,—were several beautiful girls in various attitudes of indolence and ease,—one laughing black-haired houri was amusing herself with a tame bird which flew to and from her uplifted finger,—another in a half-sitting posture, played cup-and-ball with much active and graceful dexterity,—some were working at gold and silver embroidery,—others, clustered in a semi-circle round a large osier basket filled with myrtle, were busy weaving garlands of the fragrant leaves,—and one maiden, seemingly younger than the rest, and of lighter and more delicate complexion, leaned somewhat pensively against an ebony-framed harp, as though she were considering what sad or suggestive chords she should next awaken from its responsive strings. As Sah-lûma and Theos appeared, these nymphs all rose from their different occupations and

amusements, and stood with bent heads and folded hands in statuesque silence and humility.

“These are my human rose-buds!” said Sah-lûma softly and gaily, as holding the dazzled Theos by the arm he escorted him past these radiant and exquisite forms—“They bloom, and fade, and die, like the flowers thrown by the populace,—proud and happy to feel that their perishable loveliness has even for a brief while, been made more lasting by contact with my deathless poet-fame! Ah, Niphrâta!” and he paused at the side of the girl standing by the harp—“Hast thou sung many of my songs to-day? . . . or is thy voice too weak for such impassioned cadence?—Thou art pale, . . . I miss thy soft blush and dimpling smile,—what ails thee, my honey-throated oriole?”

“Nothing, my lord”—answered Niphrâta in a low tone, raising a pair of lovely dusky violet eyes, fringed with long black lashes,—“Nothing,—save that my heart is always sad in thine absence!”

Sah-lûma smiled, well-pleased.

“Let it be sad no longer then!” he said caressing her cheek with his hand,—and Theos saw a wave of rich colour mounting swiftly to her fair brows at his touch, as though she were a white poppy warming to crimson in the ardent

heat of the sun—"I love to see thee merry, —mirth suits a young and beauteous face like thine! Look you, Sweet!—I bring with me here a stranger from far-off lands,—one to whom Sah-lûma's name is as a star in the desert!—I must needs have thy voice in all its full lusciousness of tune to warble for his pleasure those heart-entangling ditties of mine which thou hast learned to render with such matchless tenderness! . . . Thanks, Gisenya," . . . this as another maiden advanced, and gently removing the myrtle-wreath he wore, placed one just freshly woven on his clustering curls, . . . then, turning to Theos, he inquired—"Wilt thou also wear a minstrel-garland, my friend? Niphrâta or Gisenya will crown thee!"

"I am not worthy"—answered Theos, bending his head in low salutation to the two lovely girls, who stood eyeing him with a certain wistful wonder—"One spray from Sah-lûma's discarded wreath will best suffice me!"

Sah-lûma broke into a laugh of absolute delight.

"I swear thou speakest well and like a true man!" he said joyously. "Unfamous as thou art, thou deservest honour for the frank confession of thy lack of merit! Believe me, there

are some boastful rhymers in Al-Kyris who would benefit much by a share of thy becoming modesty! Give him his wish, Gisenya—"—and Gisenya, obediently detaching a sprig of myrtle from the wreath Sah-lûma had worn all day, handed it to Theos with a graceful obeisance—"For who knows but the leaves may contain a certain witchery we wot not of, that shall endow him with a touch of the divine inspiration!"

At that moment, a curious figure came shuffling across the splendid hall,—that of a little old man somewhat shabbily attired, upon whose wrinkled countenance there seemed to be a fixed malign smile, like the smile of a mocking Greek mask. He had small, bright beady black eyes placed very near the bridge of his large hooked nose,—his thin wispy grey locks streamed scantily over his bent shoulders, and he carried a tall staff to support his awkward steps,—a staff with which he made a most disagreeable tapping noise on the marble pavement as he came along.

"Ah, Sir Gad-about!" he exclaimed in a harsh squeaky voice as he perceived Sah-lûma—"Back again from your self-advertizing in the city! Is there any poor soul left in Al-Kyris whose ears have not been deafened

by the parrot-cry of the name of Sah-lûma? —If there is,—at him, at him, my dainty warbler of tiresome trills!—at him, and storm his senses with a rhodomontade of rhymes without reason!—at him, Immortal of the Immortals! —Bard of Bards!—stuff him with quatrains and sextains!—beat him with blank verse, blank of all meaning!—lash him with ballad and sonnet-scourges, till the tortured wretch, howling for mercy, shall swear that no poet save Sah-lûma, ever lived before, or will ever live again, on the face of the shuddering and astonished earth!”

And breathless with this extraordinary outburst, he struck his staff loudly on the floor, and straightway fell into such a violent fit of coughing that his whole lean body shook with the paroxysm.

Sah-lûma laughed heartily,—laughter in which he was joined by all the assembled maidens, including the gentle, pensive-eyed Niphrâta. Standing erect in his glistening princely attire, with one hand resting familiarly on Theos's arm, and the sparkle of mirth lighting up his handsome features, he formed the greatest contrast imaginable to the little shrunken old personage, who, clinging convulsively to his staff, was entirely absorbed in his efforts to

control and overcome his sudden and unpleasant attack of threatened suffocation.

“Theos, my friend”—he said, still laughing—“Thou must know the admirable Zabâstes,—a man of vast importance in his own opinion! Have done thy wheezing”—he continued, vehemently thumping the struggling old gentleman on the back—“Here is another one of the minstrel-craft thou hatest,—hast aught of bitterness in thy barbèd tongue wherewith to welcome him as guest to mine abode?”

Thus adjured, the old man peered up at Theos inquisitively, wiping away the tears that his coughing had brought into his eyes, and after a minute or two began also to laugh in a smothered chuckling way,—a laugh that resembled the croaking of frogs in a marshy pool.

“Another one of the minstrel-craft!” he echoed derisively—“Aye, aye!.. Like meets like, and fool consorts with fool!.. The guest of Sah-lûma!.. Hearken, young man,—” and he drew closer, the malign grin widening on his furrowed face,—“Thou shalt learn enough trash here to stock thee with idiot-songs for a century! Thou shalt gather up such fragments of stupidity, as shall provide thee with food for all the puling love-sick girls of a

nation! Dost thou write follies also?.. thou shalt not write them here,—thou shalt not even think them!—for here Sah-lûma,—the great, the unrivalled Sah-lûma,—is sole Lord of the land of Poesy. Poesy!—by all the gods!—I would the accursèd art had never been invented!.. so might the world have been spared many long-drawn nothings, enwoofed in obscure and distracting phraseology!... *Thou* a would-be Poet?—go to!—make bricks, mend sandals, dig entrenchments, fight for thy country,—and leave the idle stringing of words, and the tinkling of rhyme, to children like Sah-lûma, who play with life instead of living it!”

And with this, he hobbled off uneasily, grunting and grumbling as he went, and waving his staff magisterially right and left to warn the smiling maidens out of his way,—and once more Sah-lûma’s laughter, clear and joyous, pealed through the vaulted vestibule.

“Poor Zabâstes!” he said in a tone of good-humoured tolerance—“He has the most caustic wit of any man in Al-Kyris! He is a positive marvel of perverseness and ill-humour, well worth the four hundred golden pieces I pay him yearly for his task of being my scribe and critic. Like all of us he must live, eat and wear decent clothing,—and that his only literary

skill lies in the abuse of better men than himself, is his misfortune rather than his fault. Yes!.. he is my paid Critic,—paid to rail against me on all occasions public or private, for the merriment of those who care to listen to the mutterings of his discontent,—and, by the Sacred Veil!.. I cannot chose but laugh myself whenever I think of him! He deems his words carry weight with the people,—alas poor soul! his scorn but adds to my glory,—his derision to my fame! Nay, of a truth I need him,—even as the King needs the Court fool,—to make mirth for me in vacant moments,—for there is something grotesque in the contemplation of his cankered clownishness, that sees nought in life but the eating, the sleeping, the building, and the bargaining. Such men as he can never bear to know that there are others, gifted by heaven, for whom all common things take radiant shape and meaning,—for whom the flowers reveal their fragrant secrets,—for whom birds not only sing, but speak in most melodious utterance—for whose dreaming eyes, the very sunbeams spin bright fantasies in mid-air more lasting than the kingdoms of the world! Blind and unhappy Zabâstes!.. He is ignorant as a stone, and for him the mysteries of Nature

are for ever veiled ! The triumphal hero-march of the stars,—the brief bright rhyme of the flashing comet,—the canticle of the rose as she bares her crimson heart to the smile of the sun,—the chorus of green leaves chanting orisons to the wind,—the never-completed epic of heaven's lofty solitudes where the white moon paces, wandering like a maiden in search of love,—all these and other unnumbered joys he has lost—joys that Sah-lûma, child of the high gods and favourite of Destiny, drinks in with the light and the air !”

His eyes softened with a dreamy, intense lustre that gave them a new and almost pathetic beauty, while Theos, listening to each word he uttered, wondered whether there were ever any sounds sweeter than the rise and fall of his exquisite voice,—a voice as deliciously clear and mellow as a golden flute tenderly played.

“Yes!—though we must laugh at Zabâstes we should also pity him”—he resumed in gayer accents—“His fate is not enviable! He is nothing but a Critic—he could not well be a lesser man!—one who, unable himself to do any great work, takes refuge in finding fault with the works of others. And those who abhor true Poesy are in time themselves abhorred,—the balance of Justice never errs in these

things. The Poet wins the whole world's love, and immortal fame,—his adverse Critic brief contempt, and measureless oblivion! Come!"—he added, addressing Theos—"we will leave these maidens to their duties and pastimes,—Niphrâta!" here his dazzling smile flashed like a beam of sunlight over his face—"thou wilt bring us fruit and wine yonder,—we shall pass the afternoon together within-doors. Bid my steward prepare the Rose Chamber for my guest, and let Athazèl and Zimra attend there to wait upon him."

All the maidens saluted, touching their heads with their hands in token of obedience, and Sah-lûma leading the way, courteously beckoned Theos to follow. He did so, conscious as he went of two distinct impressions,—first, that the mysterious mental agitation he had suffered from when he had found himself so unexpectedly in a strange city, was now completely dispelled, — and secondly, that he felt as though he must have known Sah-lûma all his life! His memory still remained a blank as regarded his past career,—but this fact had ceased to trouble him, and he was perfectly tranquil, and altogether satisfied with his present surroundings. In short, to be

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in Al-Kyris, seemed to him quite in keeping with the necessary course of events,—while to be the friend and companion of Sah-lûma was more natural and familiar to his mind, than all once natural and familiar things!





CHAPTER III.

A POET'S PALACE.

GLIDING along with that graceful almost phantom-like swiftness of movement that was so much a part of his manner, Sah-lûma escorted his visitor to the further end of the great hall. There,—throwing aside a curtain of rich azure silk which partially draped two large folding-doors,—he ushered him into a magnificent apartment opening out upon the terrace and garden beyond,—a garden filled with such a marvellous profusion of foliage and flowers, that looking at it from between the glistening marble columns surrounding the palace, it seemed as though the very sky above rested edge-wise on towering pyramids of red and white bloom. Awnings of pale blue stretched from the windows across the entire width of the spacious outer colonnade, and here, two small boys, half nude, and black as polished ebony, were huddled together on the

mosaic pavement, watching the arrogant deportment of a superb peacock that strutted majestically to and fro with boastfully-spreading tail and glittering crest as brilliant as the gleam of the hot sun on the silver fringe of the azure canopies.

“Up, lazy rascals!” cried Sah-lûma imperiously, as with the extreme point of his sandalled foot, he touched the dimpled shiny back of the nearest boy—“Up, and away! . . . Fetch rose-water and sweet perfumes hither! By the gods! . . . ye have let the incense in yonder burner smoulder!”—and he pointed to a massive brazen vessel, gorgeously ornamented, from whence rose but the very faintest blue whiff of fragrant smoke—“Off with ye both, ye basking blackamoors! bring fresh frankincense,—and palm-leaves wherewith to stir this heated air—hence and back again like a lightning-flash! . . . or out of my sight for ever!”

While he spoke, the little fellows stood trembling and ducking their woolly heads, as though they half expected to be seized by their irate master and flung, like black balls, out into the wilderness of flowers, but glancing timidly up and perceiving that even in the midst of his petulance he smiled, they took courage, and as soon as he had ceased, they darted off with the

swiftness of flying arrows, each striving to outstrip the other in a race across the terrace and garden. Sah-lûma laughed as he watched them disappear,—and then stepping back into the interior of the apartment he turned to Theos and bade him be seated. Theos sank unresistingly into a low velvet-cushioned chair richly carved and inlaid with ivory, and stretching his limbs indolently therein, surveyed with new and ever growing admiration the supple elegant figure of his host, who, throwing himself full length on a couch covered with leopard-skins, folded his arms behind his head, and eyed his guest with a complacent smile of vanity and self-approval.

“’Tis not an altogether unfitting retreat for a poet’s musings”—he said assuming an air of indifference, as he glanced round his luxurious, almost royally-appointed room—“I have heard of worse!—But truly it needs the highest art of all known nations to worthily deck a habitation wherein the Divine Muse may daily dwell, . . . nevertheless, air, light and flowers are not lacking, and on these, methinks I could subsist, were I deprived of all other things!”

Theos sat silent, looking about him wistfully. Was ever poet, king or even emperor, housed more sumptuously than this, he thought? . . . as

his eyes wandered to the domed ceiling, wreathed with carved clusters of grapes and pomegranates,—the walls, frescoed with glowing scenes of love and song-tournament,—the groups of superb statuary that gleamed whitely out of dusky velvet-draped corners,—the quaintly shaped book-cases, overflowing with books, and made so as to revolve round and round at a touch, or move to and fro on noiseless wheels,—the grand busts, both in bronze and marble, that stood on tall pedestals or projecting brackets;—and,—while he dimly noted all these splendid evidences of unlimited wealth and luxury,—the perfume and lustre of the place, the glitter of gold and azure, silver and scarlet, the oriental languor pervading the very air, and above all the rich amber and azure-tinted light that bathed every object in a dream-like and fairy radiance, plunged his senses into a delicious confusion,—a throbbing fever of delight to which he could give no name, but which permeated every fibre of his being.

He felt half blinded with the brilliancy of the scene,—the dazzling glow of colour,—the sheen of deep and delicate hues cunningly intermixed and contrasted,—the gorgeous lavishness of waving blossoms that seemed to

surge up like a sea to the very windows,—and though many thoughts flitted hazily through his brain, he could not shape them into utterance. He stared vaguely at the floor,—it was paved with variegated mosaic and strewn with the soft dark furry skins of wild animals,—at a little distance from where he sat there was a huge bronze lectern supported by a sculptured griffin with horns,—horns which curving over at the top, turned upwards again in the form of candelabra,—the harp-bearer had brought in the harp, and it now stood in a conspicuous position decked with myrtle, some of the garlands woven by the maidens being no doubt used for this purpose.

Yet there was something mirage-like and fantastic in the splendour that everywhere surrounded him,—he felt as though he were one of the spectators in a vast auditorium where the curtain had just risen on the first scene of the play. He was dubiously considering in his own perplexed mind, whether such princely living were the privilege, or right, or custom of poets in general, when Sah-lûma spoke again, waving his hand towards one of the busts near him—a massive frowning head magnificently sculptured.

“There is the glorious Oruzèl!” he said—

“The father, as we all must own, of the Art of Poesy, and indeed of all true literature! Yet there be some who swear he never lived at all,—aye! though his poems have come down to us,—and many are the arguments I have had with so-called wise men like Zabâstes, concerning his style and method of versification. Everything he has written bears the impress of the same master-touch,—nevertheless garrulous controversialists hold that his famous work the ‘Rûva-Kâlama’ descended by oral tradition from mouth to mouth till it came to us in its ‘improved’ present condition. ‘Improved!’” and Sah-lûma laughed disdainfully,—“As if the mumbling of an epic poem from grandsire to grandson could possibly improve it!.. it would rather be deteriorated, if not altogether changed into the merest doggerel! Nay, nay!—the ‘Rûva-Kâlama,’ is the achievement of one great mind,—not twenty Oruzè’s were born in succession to write it,—there was, there could be only one, and he, by right supreme, is chief of the Bards Immortal! As well might fools hereafter wrangle together and say there were many Sah-lûmas!.. only I have taken good heed posterity shall know there was only *one*, —unmatched for love-impassioned singing

throughout the length and breadth of the world!"

He sprang up from his recumbent posture and attracted Theos's attention to another bust even finer than the last,—it was placed on a pedestal wreathed at the summit and at the base with laurel.

"The divine Hyspiros!" he exclaimed pointing to it in a sort of ecstasy—"The Master from whom it may be I have caught the perfect entrancement of my own verse-melody! His fame, as thou knowest, is unrivalled and universal—yet—canst thou believe it!.. there hath been of late an ass found in Al-Kyris who hath chosen him as a subject for his braying—and other asses join in the un-euphonious chorus. The marvellous Plays of Hyspiros!.. the grandest tragedies, the airiest comedies, the tenderest fantasies, ever created by human brain, have been called in question by these thistle-eating animals!—and one most untractable mule-head hath made pretence to discover therein a passage of secret writing which shall, so the fool thinks, prove that Hyspiros was not the author of his own works, but only a literary cheat, and forger of another and lesser man's inspiration! By the gods!—one's sides would split with laugh-

ter at the silly brute, were he not altogether too contemptible to provoke even derision! Hyspiros a traitor to the art he served and glorified? . . . Hyspiros a literary juggler and trickster? . . . By the Serpent's Head! they may as well seek to prove the fiery Sun in Heaven a common oil-lamp, as strive to lessen by one iota the transcendent glory of the noblest poet the centuries have ever seen!"

Warmed by enthusiasm, with his eyes flashing and the impetuous words coursing from his lips, his head thrown back, his hand uplifted, Sah-lûma looked magnificent,—and Theos, to whose misty brain the names of Oruzèl and Hyspiros carried no positively distinct meaning, was nevertheless struck by a certain suggestiveness in his remarks that seemed to bear on some discussion in the literary world that had taken place quite recently. He was puzzled and tried to fix the precise point round which his thoughts strayed so hesitatingly, but he could arrive at no definite conclusion. The brilliant meteor-like Sah-lûma meantime flashed hither and thither about the room, selecting certain volumes from his loaded book-stands, and bringing them in a pile, he set them on a small table by his visitor's side.

“These are some of the earliest editions of the plays of Hyspiros”—he went on, talking in that rapid fluent way of his that was as musical as a bird’s song—“They are rare and curious. See you!—the names of the scribes and the dates of issue are all distinct. Ah!—the treasures of poetry enshrined within these pages!.. was ever papyrus so gemmed with pearls of thought and wisdom?—If there were a next world, my friend,”—and here he placed his hand familiarly on his guest’s shoulder, while the bright steel-grey under-gleam sparkled in his splendid eyes—“ ‘twould be worth dwelling in for the sake of Hyspiros, —as grand a god as any of the Thunderers in the empyrean!”

“Surely there is a next world”—murmured Theos scarcely knowing what he said—“A world where thou and I, Sah-lûma, and all the masters and servants of song shall meet and hold high festival!”

Sah-lûma laughed again, a little sadly this time, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Believe it not!” he said, and there was a touch of melancholy in his rich voice—“We are midges in a sunbeam,—emmetts on a sand-hill.. no more! Is there a next world, thinkest thou, for the bees who die of surfeit

in the nilica-cups?—for the whirling drift of brilliant butterflies that sleepily float with the wind unknowing whither, till met by the icy blast of the north, they fall like broken and colourless leaves in the dust of the high-road? Is there a next world for this?”—and he took from a tall vase near at hand a delicate flower, lily-shaped and deliciously odorous, . “The expression of its soul or mind is in its fragrance,—even as the expression of ours finds vent in thought and aspiration,—have we more right to live again than this most innocently fair blossom, unsmirched by deeds of evil? Nay!—I would more easily believe in a heaven for birds and flowers, than for women and men!”

A shadow of pain darkened his handsome face as he spoke, . . and Theos, gazing full at him, became suddenly filled with pity and anxiety,—he passionately longed to assure him that there was in very truth a future higher and happier existence,—he, Theos, would vouch for the fact! But how? . . and why? . . . What could he say? . . what could he prove? . . .

His throat ached,—his eyeballs burned, . he was as it were forbidden to speak, notwithstanding the yearning desire he felt to impart to the soul of his new-found friend

something of that indescribable sense of *everlastingness* which he himself was now conscious of, even as one set free of prison is conscious of liberty. Mute, and with a feeling as of hot unshed tears welling up from his very heart, he turned over the volumes of Hyspiros almost mechanically,—they were formed of sheets of papyrus artistically bound in loose leather coverings and tied together with gold-coloured ribbon.

The Kyrisian language was, as has been before stated, perfectly familiar to him though he could not tell how he had acquired the knowledge of it,—and he was able to see at a glance that Sah-lûma had good cause to be enthusiastic in his praise of the author whose genius he so fervently admired. There was a ringing richness in the rush of the verse,—a wealth of simile combined with a simplicity and directness of utterance that charmed the ear while influencing the mind, and he was beginning to read in *sotto-voce* the opening lines of a spirited battle-challenge running thus :

“I tell thee O thou pride-enthronèd King
 That from these peaceful fields, these harvest lands,
 Strange crops shall spring, not sown by thee or thine !
 Arm'd millions, bristling weapons, helmèd men
 Dreadfully plum'd and eager for the fray,

Steel-crested myrmidons, toss'd spears, wild steeds,
 Uplifted flags and pennons, horrid swords,
 Death-gleaming eyes, stern hands to grasp and tear
 Life from beseeching life, till all the heavens
 Shriek havoc to the terror-trembling stars"

when the two small black pages lately dispatched in such haste by Sah-lûma, returned, each one bearing a huge gilded bowl filled with rose-water, together with fine linen cloths, lace-fringed, and soft as satin.

Kneeling humbly down, one before Theos, the other before Sah-lûma, they lifted these great shining bowls on their heads, and remained motionless. Sah-lûma dipped his face and hands in the cool, fragrant fluid,—Theos followed his example,—and when these light ablutions were completed, the pages disappeared, coming back almost immediately with baskets of loose rose-leaves, white and red, which they scattered profusely about the room. A delightful odour subtly sweet and yet not faint, began to freshen the already perfumed air,—and Sah-lûma, flinging himself again on his couch, motioned Theos to take a similar resting-place opposite.

He at once obeyed, yielding anew to the sense of indolent luxury and voluptuous ease his surroundings engendered,—and presently

A POET'S PALACE.

the aroma of rising incense mingled itself with the scent of the strewn rose-petals,—the pages had replenished the incense-burner, and now these duties done so far, they brought each a broad, long-stalked palm-leaf, and placing themselves in proper position, began to fan the two young men slowly and with measured gentleness, standing as mute as little black statues, the only movement about them being the occasional rolling of their white eyeballs and the swaying to and fro of their shiny arms as they wielded the graceful bending leaves.

“This is the way a poet should ever live!” murmured Theos, glancing up from the soft cushions among which he reclined, to Sah-lûma, who lay with his eyes half closed and a musing smile on his beautiful mouth—“Self-centred in a circle of beauty,—with naught but fair suggestions and sweet thoughts to break the charm of solitude. A Kingdom of happy fancies should be his, with gates shut fast against unwelcome intruders,—gates that should never open save to the conquering touch of woman’s kiss!.. for the master-key of Love must unlock all doors, even the doors of a minstrel’s dreaming!”

“Thinkest thou so?” said Sah-lûma lazily, turning his dark delicate head slightly round

on his glistening pale-rose satin pillow—" Nay of a truth there are times when I could bar out women from my thoughts as mere disturbers of the translucent element of poesy in which my spirit bathes. There is fatigue in love, . . . these pretty human butterflies too oft weary the flower whose honey they seek to drain. Nevertheless the passion of love hath a certain tingling pleasure in it, . . . I yield to it when it touches me, even as I yield to all other pleasant things,—but there are some who unwisely carry desire too far and make of love a misery instead of a pastime. Many will die for love,—fools are they all! To die for fame, . . . for glory, . . . that I can understand, . . . but for love! . . ." he laughed, and taking up a crushed rose-petal he flipped it into the air with his finger and thumb—" I would as soon die for sake of that perished leaf as for sake of a woman's transient beauty !"

As he uttered these words Niphrâta entered, carrying a golden salver on which were placed a tall flagon, two goblets, and a basket of fruit. She approached Theos first, and he, raising himself on his elbow, surveyed her with fresh admiration and interest while he poured out wine from the flagon into one of those glistening cups, which he noticed were rough with the

quantity of small gems used in their outer ornamentation.

He was struck by her fair and melancholy style of loveliness, and as she stood before him with lowered eyes, the colour alternately flushing and paling on her cheeks, and her bosom heaving restlessly beneath the loosely-drawn folds of her primrose-hued gown, an inexplicable emotion of pity smote him, as if he had suddenly been made aware of some inward sorrow of hers which he was utterly powerless to console. He would have spoken, but just then could find nothing appropriate to say, . . . and when he had selected a fine peach from the heaped-up dainties offered for his choice, he still watched her as she turned to Sah-lûma, who smiled, and bade her set down her salver on a low bronze stand at his side. She did so, and then with the warm blood burning in her cheeks, stood waiting and silent. Sah-lûma, with a lithe movement of his supple form, lifted himself into a half-sitting posture, and throwing one arm round her waist, drew her close to his breast and kissed her.

“My fairest moonbeam!” he said gaily—
“Thou art as noiseless and placid as thy yet unembodied sisters that stream through heaven and dance on the river when the world is

sleeping! Myrtle!..” and he detached a spray from the bosom of her dress—“What hast thou to do with the poet’s garland? By my faith, thou art like Theos yonder, and hast chosen to wear a sprig of my faded crown for thine adornment—is’t not so?” A hot and painful blush crimsoned Niphrâta’s face,—a softness as of suppressed tears glistened in her eyes,—she made no answer, but looked beseechingly at the little twig Sah-lûma held. “Silly child!” he went on laughingly, replacing it himself against her bosom where the breath seemed to struggle with such panting haste and fear—“Thou art welcome to the dead leaves sanctified by song, if thou thinkest them of value, but I would rather see the rose-bud of love nestled in that pretty white breast of thine, than the cast-off ornaments of fame!”

And filling himself a cup of wine he raised it aloft, looking at Theos smilingly as he did so.

“To your health, my noble friend!” he cried, “And to the joys of the passing hour!”

“A wise toast!” answered Theos, placing his lips to his own goblet’s rim,—“For the past is past,—’twill never return,—the future we know not,—and only the present can be called our own! To the health of the divine

Sah-lûma, whose fame is my glory!—whose friendship is dear to me as life!”

And with this, he drained off the wine to the last drop. Scarcely had he done so, when the most curious sensation overcame him—a sensation of bewildering ecstasy as though he had drunk of some ambrosial nectar or magic drug which had suddenly wound up his nerves to an acute tension of indescribable delight. The blood coursed more swiftly through his veins,—he felt his face flush with the impulsive heat and ardour of the moment,—he laughed as he set the cup down empty, and throwing himself back on his luxurious couch, his eyes flashed on Sah-lûma's with a bright comprehensive glance of complete confidence and affection. It was strange to note how quickly Sah-lûma returned that glance,—how thoroughly, in so short a space of time, their friendship had cemented itself into a more than fraternal bond of union! Niphrâta meanwhile stood a little aside, her wistful looks wandering from one to the other as though in something of doubt or wonder. Presently she spoke, inclining her fair head towards Sah-lûma.

“My lord goes to the Palace to-night to make his valued voice heard in the presence of the King?” she inquired timidly.

“Even so, Niphrâta!” responded the Laureate, passing his hand carelessly through his clustering curls—“I have been summoned thither by the Royal command. But what of that, little one? Thou knowest 'tis a common occurrence,—and that the Court is bereft of all pleasure and sweetness when Sah-lûma is silent!”

“My lord’s guest goes with him?” pursued Niphrâta gently.

“Aye, most assuredly!”—and Sah-lûma smiled at Theos as he spoke—“Thou wilt accompany me to the King, my friend?” he went on—“He will give thee a welcome for my sake, and though of a truth His Majesty is most potently ignorant of all things save the arts of love and warfare, nevertheless he is man as well as monarch, and thou wilt find him noble in his greeting and generous of hospitality.”

“I will go with thee, Sah-lûma, anywhere!” replied Theos quickly—“For in following such a guide, I follow my own most perfect pleasure!”

Niphrâta looked at him meditatively, with a melancholy expression in her lovely eyes.

“My lord Sah-lûma’s presence indeed brings joy!” she said softly and tremulously—“But

the joy is too sweet and brief,—for when he departs, none can fill the place he leaves vacant !” She paused,—Sah-lûma’s gaze rested on her intently, a half amused, half tender light leaping from under the drooping shade of his long silky black lashes,—she caught the look, and a little shiver ran through her delicate frame,—she pressed one hand on her heart, and resumed in steadier and more even tones,—“ My lord has perhaps not heard of the disturbances of the early morning in the city ?”—she asked—“ The riotous crowd in the market-place—the ravings of the Prophet Khosrûl ? . . the sudden arrest and imprisonment of many,—and the consequent wrath of the King ? ”

“ No, by my faith ! ” returned Sah-lûma, yawning slightly and settling his head more comfortably on his pillows,—“ Nor do I care to heed the turbulence of a mob that cannot guide itself and yet resists all guidance. Arrests ? . . imprisonments ? . . they are common,—but why in the name of the Sacred Veil do they not arrest and imprison the actual disturbers of the peace,—the Mystics and Philosophers whose street orations filter through the minds of the disaffected, rousing them to foolish frenzy and disordered action ?—Why, above all men, do

they not seize Khosrûl?—a veritable madman, for all his many years and seeming wisdom! Hath he not denounced the faith of Nagâya and foretold the destruction of the city times out of number? . . . and are we not all weary to death of his bombastic mouthing? If the King deemed a poet's counsel worth the taking, he would long ago have shut this bearded ranter within the four walls of a dungeon, where only rats and spiders would attend his lectures on approaching Doom!"

"Nay, but my lord—" Niphrâta ventured to say timidly—"The King dare not lay hands on Khosrûl . . ."

"Dare not!" laughed Sah-lûma lazily stretching out his hand and helping himself to a luscious nectarine from the basket at his side—"Sweet Niphrâta! . . . settest thou a limit to the power of the King? As well draw a boundary-line for the imagination of the poet! Khosrûl may be loved and feared by a certain number of superstitious malcontents who look upon a madman as a sort of sacred wild animal,—but the actual population of Al-Kyris,—the people who are the blood, bone and sinew of the city,—these are not in favour of change either in religion, laws, manners or customs. But Khosrûl is old,—and that the King humours his

vagaries is simply out of pity for his age and infirmity, Niphrâta,—not because of fear! Our Monarch knows no fear!”

“Khosrûl prophesies terrible things!”... murmured the girl hesitatingly—“I have often thought... if they should come true!...”

“Thou timid dove!” and Sah-lûma rising from his couch, kissed her neck lightly, thus causing a delicate flush of crimson to ripple through the whiteness of her skin—“Think no more of such folly—thou wilt anger me! That a doting graybeard like Khosrûl should trouble the peace of Al-Kyris the Magnificent, .. by the gods!—the whole thing is absurd! Let me hear no more of mobs or riots, or road-rhetoric,—my soul abhors even the suggestion of discord. Tranquillity! . . Divinest calm, disturbed only by the flutterings of winged thoughts hovering over the cloudless heaven of fancy!.. this, this alone is the sum and centre of my desires,—and to-day I find that even thou, Niphrâta—” here his voice took upon itself an injured tone,—“thou, who art usually so gentle, hast somewhat troubled the placidity of my mind by thy foolish talk concerning common and unpleasant circumstances,...” He stopped short and a line of vexation and annoyance made its appearance between his broad

beautiful brows, while Niphrâta seeing this expression of almost baby-petulance in the face she adored, threw herself suddenly at his feet, and raising her lovely eyes swimming in tears she exclaimed—

“ My lord! Sah-lûma! Singing-angel of Niphrâta’s soul!—Forgive me! It is true, . . thou shouldst never hear of strife or contention among the coarser tribe of men,—and I, . I, poor Niphrâta, would give my life to shield thee from the faintest shadow of annoy! I would have thy path all woven sunbeams,—thou shouldst live like a fairy monarch embowered ’mid roses, sheltered from rough winds, and folded in loving arms, fairer maybe, but not more fond than mine!” Her voice broke,—stooping, she kissed the silver fastening of his sandal, and springing up, rushed from the room before a word could be uttered to bid her stay.

Sah-lûma looked after her with a pretty, half-pleased perplexity.

“ She is often thus!” he said in a tone of playful resignation,—“ As I told thee, Theos,—women are butterflies, hovering hither and thither on uneasy pinions, uncertain of their own desires. Niphrâta is a woman-riddle,—sometimes she angers me,—sometimes she

soothes, . . now she prattles of things that concern me not, . and anon converses with such high and lofty earnestness of speech, that I listen amazed, and wonder where she hath gathered up her store of seeming wisdom

“Love teaches her all she knows!” interrupted Theos quickly and with a meaning glance.

Sah-lûma laughed languidly, a faint colour warming the clear olive pallor of his complexion.

“Aye,—poor tender little soul, she loves me,” . . he said carelessly—“That is no secret! But then all women love me,—I am more like to die of a surfeit of love than of anything else!” He moved towards the open window. “Come!—” he added—“It is the hour of sunset,—there is a green hillock in my garden yonder from whence we can behold the pomp and panoply of the golden god’s departure. ’Tis a sight I never miss,—I would have thee share its glory with me.”

“But art thou then indifferent to woman’s tenderness?” asked Theos half banteringly as he took his arm—“Dost thou love no one?”

“My friend”—replied Sah-lûma seriously—“I love Myself! I see naught that contents me more than my own Personality,—and with all my heart I admire the miracle and beauty of my own existence! There is nothing even in

the completest fairness of womanhood that satisfies me so much as the contemplation of my own genius,—realizing as I do, its wondrous power and perfect charm! The life of a poet such as I am, is a perpetual marvel!—the whole Universe ministers to my needs,—Humanity becomes the merest bound slave to the caprice of my imperial imagination,—with a thought I scale the stars,—with a wish I float in highest ether among spheres undiscovered yet familiar to my fancy—I converse with the spirits of flowers and fountains,—and the love of woman is a mere drop in the deep ocean of my unfathomed delight! Yes,—I adore my own Identity! . . . and of a truth Self-worship is the only Creed the world has ever followed faithfully to the end!”

He glanced up with a bright assured smile,—Theos met his gaze wonderingly, doubtfully,—but made no reply,—and together they paced slowly across the marble terrace, and out into the glorious garden, rich with the riotous roses that clambered and clustered everywhere, their hues deepening to flame-like vividness in the burning radiance of the sinking sun.



CHAPTER IV.

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

THEY walked side by side for some little time without speaking, through winding paths of alternate light and shade, sheltered by the lattice-work of crossed and twisted green boughs where only the amorous chant of chirring birds now and then broke the silence with fitful and tender sweetness. All the air about them was fragrant and delicate,—tiny rainbow-winged midges whirled round and danced in the warm sunset-glow like flecks of gold in amber wine,—while here and there the distant glimmer of tossing fountains, or the soft emerald sheen of a prattling brook that wound in and out the grounds, among banks of moss and drooping fern, gave a pleasant touch of coolness and refreshment to the brilliant verdure of the luxuriant landscape.

“Speaking of creeds, Sah-lûma—” said

Theos at last, looking down with a curious sense of compassion and protection at his companion's slight graceful form—"What religion is it that dominates this city and people? To-day through want of knowledge, it seems I committed a nearly unpardonable offence by gazing at the beauty of the Virgin Priestess when I should have knelt face-hidden to her benediction,—thou must tell me something of the common laws of worship, that I err not thus blindly again."

Sah-lûma smiled.

"The common laws of worship are the common laws of custom"—he replied—"No more,—no less. And in this we are much like other nations. We believe in no actual Creed,—who does? We accept a certain given definition of a supposititious Divinity, together with the suitable maxims and code of morals accompanying that definition, . . . we call this Religion, . . . and we wear it as we wear our clothing for the sake of necessity and decency, . . . though truly we are not half so concerned about it as about the far more interesting details of taste in attire. Still, we have grown used to our doctrine, and some of us will fight with each other for the difference of a word respecting it,—and as it contains within itself many seeds of discord and contradiction,

such dissensions are frequent, especially among the priests, who, were they but true to their professed vocation, should be able to find ways of smoothing over all apparent inconsistencies and maintaining peace and order. Of course we, in union with all civilized communities, worship the Sun, even as thou must do,—in this one leading principle at least, our faith is universal!”

Theos bent his head in assent. He was scarcely conscious of the action, but at the moment he felt, with Sah-lûma, that there was no other form of Divinity acknowledged in the world than the refulgent Orb that gladdens and illumines earth, and visibly controls the seasons.

“And yet—” went on Sah-lûma thoughtfully —“the well-instructed know through our scientists and astronomers (many of whom are now languishing in prison for the boldness of their researches and discoveries) that the Sun is no divinity at all, but simply a huge Planet, —a dense body surrounded by a luminous flame-darting atmosphere, —neither self-acting nor omnipotent, but only one of many similar orbs moving in strict obedience to fixed mathematical laws. Nevertheless this knowledge is wisely kept back as much as possible from the

multitude,—for, were science to unveil her marvels too openly to semi-educated and vulgarly constituted minds, the result would be, first Atheism, next Republicanism, and finally Anarchy and Ruin. If these evils,—which like birds of prey continually hover about all great kingdoms,—are to be averted, we must, for the welfare of the country and people, hold fast to some stated form and outward observance of religious belief.”

He paused. Theos gave him a quick searching glance.

“Even if such belief should have no shadow of a true foundation?” he inquired—“Can it be well for men to cling superstitiously to a false doctrine?”

Sah-lûma appeared to consider this question in his own mind for some minutes before replying.

“My friend, it is difficult to decide what is false and what is true—” he said at last with a little shrug of his shoulders—“But I think that even a false religion is better for the masses than none at all. Men are closely allied to brutes, . . . if the moral sense ceases to restrain them they at once leap the boundary line and give as much rein to their desires and appetites as the hyenas and tigers. And in some natures

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

the moral sense is only kept alive by fear,—fear of offending some despotic invisible Force that pervades the Universe, and whose chief and most terrible attribute is not so much creative, as destructive power. To propitiate and pacify an unseen Supreme Destroyer is the aim of all religions,—and it is for this reason we add to our worship of the Sun, that of the White Serpent, Nagâya the Mediator. Nagâya is the favourite object of the people's adoration,—they may forget to pay their vows to the Sun but never to Nagâya, who is looked upon as the emblem of Eternal Wisdom, the only pleader whose persuasions avail to soften the tyrannic humour of the Invincible Devourer of all things. We know how men hate Wisdom and cannot endure to be instructed, and yet they prostrate themselves in abject crowds before Wisdom's symbol every day in the Sacred Temple yonder,—though I much doubt whether such constant devotional attendance is not more for the sake of Lysia, than the Deified Worm!"

He laughed, with a little undercurrent of scorn in his laughter,—and Theos saw as it were, the lightning of an angry or disdainful thought flashing through the sombre splendour of his eyes.

“And Lysia is.. —?” began Theos suggestively.

“The High Priestess of Nagâya,” responded Sah-lûma slowly—“Charmer of the god, as well as of the hearts of men! The hot passion of love is to her a toy, clasped and unclasped so! . in the pink hollow of her hand..” and as he spoke he closed his fingers softly on the air and unclosed them again with an expressive gesture—“And so long as she retains the magic of her beauty, so long will Nagâya-worship hold Al-Kyris in check. Otherwise who knows!—there have been many disturbances of late,—the teachings of the Philosophers have aroused a certain discontent,—and there are those who are weary of perpetual sacrifices and the shedding of innocent blood. Moreover this mad Khosrûl of whom Niphrâta spoke lately, thunders angry denunciations of Lysia and Nagâya in the open streets, with so much fervid eloquence that they who pass by cannot choose but hear, . . . he hath a strange craze,—a doctrine of the future which he most furiously proclaims in the language prophets use. He holds that far away in the centre of a Circle of pure Light, the true God exists,—a vast all-glorious Being who with exceeding marvellous love controls

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

and guides Creation towards some majestic end, —even as a musician doth melodize his thought from small sweet notes to perfect chord-woven harmonies. Furthermore, that thousands of years hence, this God will embody a portion of His own Existence in human form and will send hither a wondrous creature, half-God, half-Man, to live our life, die our death and teach us by precept and example, the surest way to eternal happiness. 'Tis a theory both strange and wild!—hast ever heard of it before?"

He put the question indifferently, but Theos was mute. That horrible sense of a straining desire to speak when speech was forbidden again oppressed him,—he felt as though he were being strangled with his own unfalling tears. What a crushing weight of unutterable thoughts burdened his brain!—he gazed up at the serenely glowing sky in aching, dumb despair,—till slowly . . . very slowly, words came at last like dull throbs of pain beating between his lips. . .

"I think . . . I fancy . . . I have heard a rumour of such doctrine . . . but I know as little of it as . . . as *thou*, Sah-lûma! . . . I can tell thee no more . . . than *thou* hast said! . . ." He paused and gaining more firmness of tone went on—"It seems to me a not altogether impossible

conception of Divine Benevolence,—for if God lives at all, He must be capable of manifesting Himself in many ways both small and great, common and miraculous, though of a truth there are no miracles beyond what *appear* as such to our limited sight and restricted intelligence. But tell me”—and here his voice had a ring of suppressed anxiety within it—“tell me, Sah-lûma, thine own thoughts concerning it?”

“I?—I think naught of it!” replied Sah-lûma with airy contempt—“Such a creed may find followers in time to come,—but now, of what avail to warn us of things that do not concern our present modes of life? Moreover in the face of all religions, my own opinion should not alter,—I have studied science sufficiently well to know that there is *no* God!—and I am too honest to worship an unproved and merely supposititious identity!”

A shudder, as of extreme cold, ran through Theos's veins, and as if impelled on by some invisible monitor he said almost mournfully—

“Art thou sure, Sah-lûma, thou dost not instinctively feel that there is a Higher Power hidden behind the veil of visible Nature? . . . and that in the Far Beyond there may be an Eternity of Joy where thou shalt find all thy grandest aspirations at last fulfilled?”

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

Sah-lûma laughed,—a clear vibrating laugh as mellow as the note of a thrush in spring-time.

“Thou solemn soul!” he exclaimed mirthfully—“My aspirations *are* fulfilled! I aspire to no more than fame,—and that I hold,—that I shall keep so long as this world is lighted by the sun!”

“And what use is Fame to thee in Death?” demanded Theos with sudden and emphatic earnestness.

Sah-lûma stood still,—over his beautiful face came a shadow of intense melancholy,—he raised his brilliant eyes full of wistful pathos and pleading.

“I pray thee, do not make me sad, my friend!” he murmured tremulously—“These thoughts are like muttering thunder in my heaven! Death!” .. and a quick sigh escaped him—“’Twill be the breaking of my harp and heart! .. the last note of my failing voice and ever-silenced song!”

A moisture as of tears glistened on the silky fringe of his eyelids,—his lips quivered,—he had the look of a Narcissus regretfully bewailing his own perishable loveliness. On a swift impulse of affection Theos threw one arm round his neck in the fashion of a

confiding school-boy walking with his favourite companion.

“Nay, thou shalt never die, Sah-lûma!” he said with a sort of passionate eagerness,—“Thy bright soul shall live for ever in a sunshine sweeter than that of earth’s fairest midsummer noon! Thy songs can never be silenced while heaven pulsates with the unwritten music of the spheres,—and even were the crown of immortality denied to lesser men, it is, it must be the heritage of the Poet! For to him all crowns belong, all kingdoms are thrown open, all barriers broken down,—even those that divide us from the Unseen,—and God Himself has surely a smile to spare for His Singers who have made the sad world joyful if only for an hour!”

Sah-lûma looked up with a pleased yet wondering glance.

“Thou hast a silvery and persuasive tongue!” he said gently—“And thou speakest of God as if thou knewest one akin to Him. Would I could believe all thou sayest!..but alas!—I cannot. We have progressed too far in knowledge, my friend, for faith.... yet..” He hesitated a moment, then with a touch of caressing entreaty in his tone went on... “Thinkest thou in very truth that I shall live again? For

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

I confess to thee, it seems beyond all things strange and terrible to feel that this genius of mine,—this spirit of melody which inhabits my frame, should perish utterly without further scope for its abilities. There have been moments when my soul, ravished by inspiration, has, as it were, seized Earth like a full goblet of wine, and quaffed its beauties, its pleasures, its loves, its glories all in one burning draught of song!.. when I have stood in thought on the shadowy peaks of time, waiting for other worlds to string like beads on my thread of poesy,—when wondrous creatures habited in light and wreathed with stars have floated round and round me in rosy circles of fire,—and once, methought.. 'twas long ago now—I heard a Voice distinct and sweet that called me upward, onward and away, I know not where,—save that a hidden Love awaited me!” He broke off with a rapt almost angelic expression in his eyes, then sighing a little he resumed :—“All dreams of course!.. vague phantoms,—creations of my own imaginative brain,—yet fair enough to fill my heart with speechless longings for ethereal raptures unseen, unknown! Thou hast, methinks, a certain faith in the unsolved mysteries,—but I have none,—for sweet as the promise of

a future life may seem, there is no proof that it shall ever be. If one died and rose again from the dead, then might we all believe and hope . . . but otherwise”

Oh, miserable Theos!—What would he not have given to utter aloud the burning knowledge that ate into his mind like slow-devouring fire! Again mute! . . . again oppressed by that strange swelling at the heart that threatened to break forth in stormy sobs of penitence and prayer! Instinctively he drew Sah-lûma closer to his side—his breath came thick and fast . . . he struggled with all his might to speak the words . . . “One HAS died and risen from the dead!”—but not a syllable could he form of the desired sentence!

“Thou shalt live again, Sah-lûma!” was all he could say in low half-smothered accents—“Thou hast within thee a flame that cannot perish!”

Again Sah-lûma’s eyes dwelt upon him with a curious appealing tenderness.

“Thy words savour of sweet consolation! . . .” he said half gaily, half sadly. “May they be fulfilled! And if indeed there is a brighter world than this beyond the skies, I fancy thou and I will know each other there, as here, and be somewhat close companions! See!”—and

he pointed to a small green hillock that rose up like a shining emerald from the darker foliage of the surrounding trees—"Yonder is my point of vantage whence we shall behold the sun go down like a warrior sinking on the red field of battle,—the chimes are ringing even now for his departure,—listen!"

They stood still for a space, while the measured swinging cadence of bells came pealing through the stillness,—bells of every tone, that smote the air with soft or loud resonance as the faint wind wafted the sounds towards them,—and then they began to climb the little hill, Sah-lûma walking somewhat in advance, with a tread as light and elastic as that of a young fawn.

Theos following, watched his movements with a strange affection,—every turn of his head, every gesture of his hand seemed fraught with meanings as yet inexplicable. The grass beneath their feet was soft as velvet and dotted with a myriad wild flowers,—the ascent was gradual and easy, and in a few minutes they had reached the summit, where Sah-lûma throwing himself indolently on the smooth turf, pulled Theos gently down by his side. There they rested in silence, gazing at the

magnificent panorama laid out before them,—a panorama as lovely as a delicately pictured scene of fairy-land. Above, the sky was of a dense yet misty rose-colour,—the sun, low on the western horizon appeared to rest in a vast deep purple hollow, rifted here and there with broad gashes of gold,—long shafts of light streamed upwards in order like the waving pennons of an angel-army marching,—and beyond, far away from this blaze of splendid colour, the wide ethereal expanse paled into tender blue, whereon light clouds of pink and white drifted like the fluttering blossoms that fall from apple-trees in spring.

Below, and seen through a haze of rose and amber, lay the city of Al-Kyris,—its white domes, towers and pinnacled palaces rising out of the mist like a glorious mirage afloat on the borders of a burning desert. Al-Kyris the Magnificent!—it deserved its name, Theos thought, as shading his eyes from the red glare he took a wondering and gradually comprehensive view of the enormous extent of the place. He soon perceived that it was defended by six strongly fortified walls, each placed within the other at long equal distances apart, so that it might have been justly described as six cities

all merged together in one,—and from where he sat he could plainly discern the great Square where he had rested in the morning by reason of the white granite Obelisk that lifted itself sheer up against the sky, undwarfed by any of the surrounding buildings.

This gigantic monument was the most prominent object in sight, with the exception of the Sacred Temple, which Sah-lûma presently pointed out,—a round fortress-like piece of architecture ornamented with twelve gilded towers from which bells were now clashing and jangling in a storm of melodious persistency. The hum of the city's traffic and pleasure surged on the air like the noise made by swarming bees, while every now and then the sweet shrill tones of some more than usually clear girl's voice crying out the sale of fruit or flowers, soared up song-wise, through the luminous semi-transparent vapour that half-veiled the clustering house-tops, tapering spires and cupolas in a delicate nebulous film.

Completely fascinated by the wizard-like beauty of the scene, Theos felt as though he could never look upon it long enough to master all its charms, but his eyes ached with the radiance in which everything seemed

drenched as with flame, and turning his gaze once more towards the sun, he saw that it had nearly disappeared. Only a blood-red rim peered spectrally above the gold and green horizon,—and immediately overhead, a silver rift in the sky had widened slowly in the centre and narrowed at its end, thus taking the shape of a great outstretched Sword that pointed directly downwards at the busy, murmuring glittering city beneath.

It was a strange effect, and made on the mind of Theos a strange impression,—he was about to call Sah-lûma's attention to it, when an uncomfortable consciousness that they were no longer alone came over him,—instinctively he turned round, uttered a hasty exclamation, and springing erect, found himself face to face with a huge black,—a man of some six feet in height and muscular in proportion, who, clad in a vest and tunic of the most vivid scarlet hue, leered confidentially upon him as their eyes met. Sah-lûma rising also, but with less precipitation, surveyed the intruder languidly and with a certain haughtiness.

“What now, Gazrà? Always art thou like a worm in the grass, crawling on thine errands with less noise than the wind makes

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

in summer, . . . I would thy mistress kept a fairer messenger !”

The black smiled,—if so hideous a contortion of his repulsive countenance might be called a smile, and slowly raising his jetty arms, hung all over with strings of coral and amber, made a curious gesture, half of salutation, half of command. As he did this, the clear olive cheek of Sah-lûma flushed darkly red,—his chest heaved, and linking his arm through that of Theos, he bent his head slightly and stood like one in an enforced attitude of attention. Then Gazrà spoke, his harsh strong voice seeming to come from some devil in the ground rather than from a human throat.

“The Virgin Priestess of the Sun and the Divine Nagâya hath need of thee to-night Sah-lûma !” he said with a sort of suppressed derision underlying his words,—and taking from his breast a ring that glittered like a star, he held it out in the palm of one hand—“And also”—he added—“of thy friend the stranger to whom she desires to accord a welcome. Behold her Signet !”

Theos, impelled by curiosity would have taken the ring up to examine it, had not Sah-lûma restrained him by a warning pressure

of his arm,—he was only just able to see that it was in the shape of a coiled-up Serpent with ruby eyes, and a darting tongue tipped with small diamonds. What chiefly concerned him however was the peculiar change in Sah-lûma's demeanour,—something in the aspect or speech of Gazrà had surely exercised a remarkable influence upon him. His frame trembled through and through with scarcely controlled excitement, his eyes shot forth an almost evil fire, and a cold, calm, somewhat cruel smile played on the perfect outline of his delicate mouth. Taking the signet from Gazrà's palm, he kissed it with a kind of angry tenderness, then replied . .

“Tell thy mistress we shall obey her behest! Doubtless she knows, as she knows all things, that to-night I am summoned by express command, to the Palace of our sovereign lord the King . . I am bound thither first as is my duty, but afterwards . . .” He broke off as if he found it impossible to say more and waved his hand in a light sign of dismissal. But Gazrà did not at once depart. He again smiled that lowering smile of his which resembled nothing so much as a hung criminal's death-grin, and returned the jewelled signet to his breast.

“Afterwards! . . yes . . afterwards!” he said

in emphatic yet mock-solemn tones . . . “ Even so ! ” Advancing a little he laid his heavy muscular hand on Theos’s chest and appeared mentally to measure his height and breadth— “ Strong nerves ! . . . iron sinews ! . . . goodly flesh and blood ! . . . ’twill serve ! ”—and his great protruding eyes gleamed maliciously as he spoke,—then bowing profoundly he added, addressing both Sah-lûma and Theos . . . “ Noble sirs, to-night out of all men in Al-Kyris shall you be the most envied ! Farewell ! ”—and once more making that curious salutation which had in it so much imperiousness and so little obeisance, he walked backwards a few paces in the full lustre of the set sun’s after-glow, which intensified the vivid red of his costume and lit up all the ornaments of clear-cut amber that glittered against his swarthy skin,—then turning, he descended the hillock so swiftly that he seemed to have melted out of sight as utterly as a dark mist dissolving in air.

“ By my word, a most sooty and repellent bearer of a lady’s greeting ! ” laughed Theos lightly, as he sauntered arm in arm with his host on the downward path leading to the garden and palace—“ And I have yet to learn the true meaning of his message ! ”

“ ’Tis plain enough ! ” replied Sah-lûma

somewhat sulkily, with the deep flush still coming and going on his face—"It means that we are summoned, . . . thou as well as I, . . . to one of Lysia's midnight banquets,—an honour that falls to few,—a mandate none dare disobey! She must have spied thee out this morning—the only un-kneeling soul in all the abject multitude—hence perhaps, her present desire for thy company."

There was a touch of vexation in his voice, but Theos heeded it not. His heart gave a great bound against his ribs as though pricked by a fire-tipped arrow,—something swift and ardent stirred in his blood like the flowing of quicksilver, . . . the picture of the dusky-eyed witchingly beautiful woman he had seen that morning in her gold-adorned ship, seemed to float between him and the light,—her face shone out like a growing glory-flower in the tangled wilderness of his thoughts and his lips trembled a little as he replied,—

"She must be gracious and forgiving then, even as she is fair! For in my neglect of reverence due, I merited her scorn, . . . not her courtesy. But tell me, Sah-lûma, . . . how could she know I was a guest of thine?"

Sah-lûma glanced at him half-pityingly, half-disdainfully.

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

“How could she know? Easily!—inasmuch as she knows all things. ’Twould have been strange indeed had she *not* known!” and he caught at a down-drooping rose and crushed its fragrant head in his hand with a sort of wanton petulance—“The King himself is less acquainted with his people’s doings than the wearer of the All-Reflecting Eye! Thou hast not yet seen that weird mirror and potent dazzler of human sight, . . . no,—but thou *wilt* see it ere long,—the glittering Fiend-guardian of the whitest breast that ever shut in passion!” His voice shook, and he paused,—then with some effort, continued—“Yes,—Lysia has her secret commissioners everywhere throughout the length and breadth of the city, who report to her each circumstance that happens, no matter how trifling,—and doubtless we were followed home,—tracked step by step as we walked together, by one of her stealthy-footed servitors,—in this there would be naught unusual.”

“Then there is no freedom in Al-Kyris,—” said Theos wonderingly—“if the whole city thus lies under the circumspection of a woman?”

Sah-lûma laughed rather harshly.

“Freedom! By the gods, ’tis a delusive

word embodying a vain idea! Where is there any freedom in life? All of us are bound in chains and restricted in one way or the other,—the man who deems himself politically free is a slave to the multitude and his own ambition,—while he who shakes himself loose from the trammels of custom and creed, becomes the tortured bondsman of desire, tied fast with bruising cords to the rack of his own unbridled sense and appetite. There is no such thing as freedom, my friend, unless haply it may be found in death! Come,—let us in to supper,—the hour grows late, and my heart aches with an unsought heaviness,—I must cheer me with a cup of wine, or my songs to-night will sadden rather than rouse the King. Come,—and thou shalt speak to me again of the life that is to be lived hereafter,”—and he smiled with a certain pathos in his smile,—“for there are times, believe me, when in spite of all my fame and the sweetness of existence, I weary of earth’s days and nights, and find them far too brief and mean to satisfy my longings. Not the world,—but worlds,—should be the Poet’s heritage.”

Theos looked at him, with a feeling of unutterable yearning, affection, and regret, but said nothing, . . . and together they ascended the

THE SUMMONS OF THE SIGNET.

steps of the stately marble terrace and paced slowly across it, keeping as near to each other as shadow to substance, and thus re-entered the palace, where the sound of a distant harp alone penetrated the perfumed stillness. It must be Niphrâta who was playing, thought Theos, . . . and what strange and plaintive chords she swept from the vibrating strings! . . . They seemed laden with the tears of broken-hearted women dead and buried ages upon ages ago!





CHAPTER V.

SAH-LÛMA SINGS.

As they left the garden the night fell, or appeared to fall, with almost startling suddenness, and at the same time, in swift defiance of the darkness, Sah-lûma's palace was illuminated from end to end by thousands of coloured lamps, all apparently lit at once by a single flash of electricity. A magnificent repast was spread for the Laureate and his guest, in a lofty richly-frescoed banqueting-hall,—a repast voluptuous enough to satisfy the most ardent votary that ever followed the doctrines of Epicurus. Wonderful dainties and still more wonderful wines were served in princely profusion—and while the strangely-met and sympathetically - united friends ate and drank, delicious music was played on stringed instruments by unseen performers. When, at intervals, these pleasing sounds ceased, Sah-

lûma's conversation, brilliant, witty, refined and sparkling with light anecdote and lighter jest, replaced with admirable sufficiency, the left-off harmonies,—and Theos keenly alive to the sensuous luxury of his own emotions, felt that he had never before enjoyed such an astonishing, delightful and altogether fairy-like feast. Its only fault was that it came to an end too soon, he thought, when, the last course of fruit and sweet comfits being removed, he rose reluctantly from the glittering board, and prepared to accompany his host, as agreed, to the presence of the King.

In a very short time,—so bewilderingly short as to seem a mere breathing-space,—he found himself passing through the broad avenues and crowded thoroughfares of Al-Kyris on his way to the Royal abode. He occupied a place in Sah-lûma's chariot,—a gilded car shaped somewhat liked the curved half of a shell, deeply hollowed, and set on two high wheels that as they rolled made scarcely any sound; there was no seat, and both he and Sah-lûma stood erect, the latter using all the force of his slender brown hands to control the spirited prancing of the pair of jet-black steeds which, harnessed tandem-wise to the light vehicle, seemed more than once disposed to break loose into furious

gallop regardless of their master's curbing-rein.

The full moon was rising gradually in a sky as densely violet as purple pansy-leaves,—but her mellow lustre was almost put to shame by the brilliancy of the streets, which were lit up on both sides by vari-coloured lamps that diffused a peculiar intense yet soft radiance, produced, as Sah-lûma explained, from stored-up electricity. On the twelve tall Towers of the Sacred Temple shone twelve large revolving stars, that as they turned emitted vivid flashes of blue, green and amber flame like light-house signals seen from ships veering shorewards,—and the reflections thus cast on the mosaic pavement, mingling with the paler beams of the moon gave a weird and most fantastic effect to the scene. Straight ahead, a blazing arch raised like a bent bow against heaven and having in its centre the word

ZEPHORÂNIM

written in scintillating letters of fire, indicated to all beholders the name and abode of the powerful Monarch under whose dominion, according to Sah-lûma, Al-Kyris had reached its present height of wealth and prosperity.

Theos looked everywhere about him, seeing

yet scarcely realizing the wonders on which he gazed,—leaning one arm on the burnished edge of the car he glanced now and then up at the dusky skies growing thick with swarming worlds, and meditated dreamily whether it might not be within the range of possibility to be lifted with Sah-lûma, chariot, steeds and all into that beautiful fathomless empyrean, and drive among planets as though they were flowers, reining in at last before some great golden gate, which unbarred, should open into a lustrous Glory-Land fairer than all fair regions ever pictured!

How like a god Sah-lûma looked, he mused! . . . his eyes resting tenderly on the light glittering form he was never weary of contemplating. Could there be a more perfect head than that dark one crowned with myrtle? . . . could there be a more dazzling existence than that enjoyed by this child of happy fortune, this royal Laureate of a mighty King? How many poets starving in garrets and waiting for a hearing, would not curse their unlucky destinies when comparing themselves with such a Prince of Poesy, each word of whose utterance was treasured and enshrined in the hearts of a grateful and admiring people!

This was Fame indeed, . . . Fame at its utmost best,—and Theos sighed once or twice

restlessly as he inwardly reflected, how poor and unsatisfying were his own poetical powers and how totally unfitted he was to cope with a rival so vastly his superior. Not that he by any means *desired* to cross swords with Sah-lûma in a duel of song,—that was an idea that never entered his mind ;—he was simply conscious of a certain humiliated feeling,—an impression that if he would be a poet at all, he must go back to the very first beginning of the art and re-learn all he had ever known, or thought he knew.

Many strange and complex emotions were at work within him, . . . emotions which he could neither control nor analyze,—and though he felt himself fully alive,—alive to his very finger-tips, he was ever and anon aware of a curious sensation like that experienced by a suddenly startled somnambulist, who just on the point of awaking, hesitates reluctantly on the threshold of dreamland, unwilling to leave one realm of shadows for another more seeming-true yet equally transient. Entangled in perplexed reveries he scarcely noticed the brilliant crowds of people that were flocking hither and thither through the streets, many of whom recognizing Sah-lûma waved their hands or shouted some gay word of greeting,—he saw, as it were without seeing. The whirling pageant around him

was both real and unreal,—there was always a deep sense of mystery that hung like a cloud over his mind,—a cloud that no resolution of his could lift,—and often he caught himself dimly speculating as to what lay *behind* that cloud? Something, he felt sure,—something that like the clue to an intricate problem, would explain much that was now altogether incomprehensible,—moreover he remorsefully realized that he had formerly known that clue and had foolishly lost it, but how he could not tell.

His gaze wandered from the figure of Sah-lûma to that of the attendant harp-bearer who, perched on a narrow foothold at the back of the chariot held his master's golden instrument aloft as though it were a flag of song,—the signal of a poet's triumph, destined to float above the world for ever!

Just then the equipage arrived at the King's palace. Turning the horses' heads with a sharp jerk so that the mettlesome creatures almost sprang erect on their haunches, Sah-lûma drove them swiftly into a spacious courtyard, lined with soldiers in full armour and brilliantly illuminated, where two gigantic stone Sphinxes, with lit stars ablaze between their enormous brows, guarded a flight of steps that led up to what seemed to be an endless avenue of white marble

columns. Here slaves in gorgeous attire rushed forward, and seizing the prancing coursers by the bridle rein, held them fast while the Laureate and his companion alighted. As they did so, a mighty and resounding clash of weapons struck the tessellated pavement,—every soldier flung his drawn sword on the ground and doffed his helmet, and the cry of

“HAIL SAH-LÛMA!”

rose in one brief mellow, manly shout that echoed vibrantly through the heated air. Sah-lûma meanwhile ascended half-way up the steps, and there turning round, smiled and bowed with an exquisite grace and infinite condescension,—and again Theos gazed at him yearningly, lovingly, and somewhat enviously too. What a picture he made standing between the great frowning sculptured Sphinxes! contrasted with those cold and solemn visages of stone he looked like a dazzling butterfly or stray bird of paradise. His white garb glistened at every point with gems, and from his shoulders, where it was fastened with large sapphire clasps, depended a long mantle of cloth of gold, bordered thickly with swansdown,—this he held up negligently in one hand as he remained for a moment in full view of the assembled

soldiery, graciously acknowledging their enthusiastic greetings, . . . then with easy and unhasting tread he mounted the rest of the stairway, followed by Theos and his harp-bearer, and passed into the immense outer entrance-hall of the Royal Palace, known as he explained to his guest, as the Hall of the Two Thousand Columns.

Here among the massively carved pillars which looked like straight tall frosted trunks of trees, were assembled hundreds of men young and old,—evident aristocrats and nobles of high degree, to judge from the magnificence of their costumes, while in and out their brilliant ranks glided little pages in crimson and blue,—black slaves semi-nude or clothed in vivid colours,—court officials with jewelled badges and insignias of authority,—military guards clad in steel armour and carrying short drawn scimeters,—all talking, laughing, gesticulating and elbowing one another as they moved to and fro,—and so thickly were they pressed together that at first sight it seemed impossible to penetrate through so dense a crowd :—but no sooner did Sah-lûma appear, than they all fell back in orderly rows, thus making an open avenue-like space for his admittance.

He walked slowly, with proudly-assured mien

and a confident smile,—bowing right and left in response to the respectful salutations he received from all assembled,—many persons glanced inquisitively at Theos, but as he was the Laureate's companion he was saluted with nearly equal courtesy. The old critic Zabâstes, squeezing his lean bent body from out the throng, hobbled after Sah-lûma at some little distance behind the harp-bearer, muttering to himself as he went and bestowing many a side-leer and malicious grin on those among his acquaintance whom he here and there recognized. Theos noted his behaviour with a vague sense of amusement,—the man took such evident delight in his own ill-humour, and seemed to be so thoroughly convinced that his opinion on all affairs was the only one worth having.

“Thou must check thy tongue to-day, Zabâstes!” said a handsome youth in dazzling blue and silver, who just then detaching himself from the crowd, laid a hand on the critic's arm and laughed as he spoke—“I doubt me much whether the King is in humour for thy grim fooling! His Majesty hath been seriously discomposed since his return from the royal tiger-hunt this morning, notwithstanding that his unerring spear slew two goodly and most furious

animals. He is wondrous sullen,—and only the divine Sah-lûma is skilled in the art of soothing his troubled spirit. Therefore,—if thou hast aught of crabbed or cantankerous to urge against thy master's genius, thou hadst best reserve it for another time, lest thy withered head roll on the market-place with as little reverence as a dried gourd flung from a fruiterer's stall!"

"I thank thee for thy warning, young jackanapes!" retorted Zabâstes, pausing in his walk and leaning on his staff while he peered with his small, black bad-tempered eyes at the speaker—"Thou art methinks somewhat over well-informed for a little lacquey! What knowest thou of His Majesty's humours? Hast been his fly-i'-the-ear or cast-off sandal-string? I pray thee extend not thy range of learning beyond the proper temperature of the bath, and the choice of rare unguents for thy skin—greater knowledge than this would injure the tender texture of thy fragile brain! Pah!"—and Zabâstes sniffed the air in disgust—"Thou hast a most vile odour of jessamine about thee!.. I would thou wert clean of perfumes and less tawdry in attire!"

Chuckling hoarsely he ambled onward, and chancing to catch the wondering backward

glance of Theos, he made expressive signs with his fingers in derision of Sah-lûma's sweeping mantle, which now, allowed to fall to its full length, trailed along the marble floor with a rich rustling sound, the varied light sparkling on it at every point and making it look like a veritable shower of gold.

On through the seemingly endless colonnades they passed, till they came to a huge double door formed of two glittering colossal winged figures holding enormous uplifted shields. Here stood a personage clad in a silver coat-of-mail, so motionless that at first he appeared to be part of the door, . but at the approach of Sah-lûma he stirred into life and action, and touching a spring beside him, the arms of the twin colossi moved, the great double shields were slowly lowered, and the portals slid asunder noiselessly, thus displaying the sumptuous splendour of the Royal Presence-Chamber.

It was a spacious and lofty saloon completely lined with gilded columns, between which hung numerous golden lamps having long pointed amber pendants, that flashed down a million sparkles as of sunlight on the magnificent mosaic floor beneath. On the walls were rich tapestries storied with voluptuous scenes of love as well as ghastly

glimpses of warfare, . . . and languishing beauties reposing in the arms of their lovers, or listening to the songs of passion, were depicted side by side with warriors dead on the field of battle, or struggling hand to hand in grim and bleeding conflict. The corners of this wonderful apartment were decked with all sorts of flags and weapons, and in the middle of the painted ceiling was suspended a huge bird with the spread wings of an eagle and the head of an owl, that held in its curved talons a superb girandole formed of a hundred extended swords, each bare blade having at its point a bright lamp in the shape of a star, while the clustered hilts composed the centre.

Officers in full uniform were ranged on both sides of the room, and a number of other men richly attired stood about, conversing with each other in low tones, . . . but though Theos took in all these details rapidly at a glance, his gaze soon became fixed on the glittering Pavilion that occupied the furthest end of the saloon, where, on a massive throne of ivory and silver sat the chief object of attraction, . . . Zephorânim the King. The steps of the royal dais were strewn ankle-deep with flowers, . . . on either hand a bronze lion lay couchant, . . . and four gigantic black statues of men supported the

monarch's gold-fringed canopy, their uplifted arms being decked with innumerable rows of large and small pearls. The King's features were not just then visible—he was leaning back in an indolent attitude, resting on his elbow, and half covering his face with one hand. The individual in the silver coat-of-mail whispered something in Sah-lûma's ear either by way of warning or advice, and then advanced, prostrating himself before the dais and touching the ground humbly with his forehead and hands. The King stirred slightly, but did not alter his position, . . . he was evidently wrapped in a deep and seemingly unpleasant reverie.

“Dread my lord . . . !” began the Herald-in-Waiting. A movement of decided impatience on the part of the monarch caused him to stop short.

“By my soul!” said a rich strong voice that made itself distinctly audible throughout the spacious hall—“Thou art ever shivering on the edge of thy duty when thou shouldst plunge boldly into the midst thereof! How long wilt mouth thy words? . . . Canst never speak plain?”

“Most potent Sovereign!” went on the stammering herald—“Sah-lûma waits thy royal pleasure!”

“Sah-lûma!” and the monarch sprang erect,

his eyes flashing fire—"Nay, that *he* should wait, bodes ill for thee, thou knave! How dar'st thou bid him wait?—Entreat him hither with all gentleness, as befits mine equal in the realm!"

As he thus spoke, Theos was able to observe him more attentively;—indeed it seemed as though a sudden and impressive pause had occurred in the action of a drama in order to allow him as spectator, to thoroughly master the meaning of one special scene. Therefore he took the opportunity offered, and looking full at Zephorânim, thought he had never beheld so magnificent a man. Of stately height and herculean build, he was most truly royal in outward bearing,—though a physiognomist judging him from the expression of his countenance would at once have given him all the worst vices of a reckless voluptuary and utterly selfish sensualist. His straight low brows indicated brute force rather than intellect,—his eyes, full, dark and brilliant, had in them a suggestion of something sinister and cruel despite their fine clearness and lustre, while the heavy lines of his mouth, only partly concealed by a short thick black beard, plainly betokened that the monarch's tendencies were by no means

towards the strict and narrow paths of virtue.

Nevertheless he was a splendid specimen of the human animal at its best physical development, and his attire, which was a mixture of the civilized and savage, suited him as it certainly would not have suited any less stalwart frame. His tunic was of the deepest purple brodered with gold,—his vest of pale amber silk, was thrown open so as to display to the greatest advantage his broad muscular chest and throat glittering all over with gems,—and he wore flung loosely across his left shoulder, a superb leopard skin, just kept in place by a clasp of diamonds. His feet were shod with gold-coloured sandals,—his arms were bare and lavishly decked with jewelled armlets,—his rough dark hair was tossed carelessly above his brow whereon a circlet of gold studded with large rubies glittered in the light,—from his belt hung a great sheathed sword, together with all manner of hunting implements,—and beside him on a velvet-covered stand, lay a short sceptre, having at its tip one huge egg-shaped pearl set in sapphires.

Noting the grand poise of his figure, and the statuesque grace of his attitude, a strange,

hazy far-off memory began to urge itself on Theos's mind,—a memory that with every second grew more painfully distinct, *He had seen Zephorânim before!* Where, he could not tell,—but he was as positive of it as that he himself lived! . . . and this inward conviction was accompanied by a certain undefinable dread,—a vague terror and foreboding, though he knew no actual cause or fear.

He had however no time to analyse his emotion,—for just then, the Herald-in-Waiting having performed a backward evolution from the throne to the threshold of the audience-chamber, beckoned impatiently to Sah-lûma, who at once stepped forward, bidding Theos keep close behind him. The harp-bearer followed, . . . and thus all three approached the dais where the King still stood erect, awaiting them. Zabâstes the Critic, glided in also, almost unnoticed, and joined a group of courtiers at the furthest end of the long gorgeously-lighted room, . . . while at sight of the Laureate, the assembled officers saluted, and all conversation ceased. At the foot of the throne Sah-lûma paused, but made no obeisance,—raising his glorious eyes to the monarch's face he smiled,—

and Theos beheld with amazement, that here it was not the Poet who revered the King, but the King who revered the Poet!

What a strange state of things, he thought!—especially when the mighty Zephorânim actually descended three steps of his flower-strewn dais, and grasping Sah-lûma's hands raised them to his lips with all the humility of a splendid savage paying homage to his intellectual conqueror! It was a scene Theos was destined never to forget, and he gazed upon it as one gazes on a magnificently painted picture, wherein two central figures fascinate and most profoundly impress the beholder's imagination. He heard with a vague sense of mingled pleasure and sadness, the deep mellow tones of the monarch's voice vibrating through the silence, . . .

“Welcome, my Sah-lûma!—Welcome at all times, but chiefly welcome when the heart is weighted by care! I have thought of thee all day, believe me! . . . aye, since early dawn, when on my way to the chase I heard in the depths of the forest a happy nightingale singing, and deemed thy voice had taken bird-shape and followed me! And that I sent for thee in haste, blame me not!—as well blame the desert

athirst for rain, or the hungry heart agape for love to come and fill it!" Here his restless eye flashed on Theos, who stood quietly behind Sah-lûma, passive, yet expectant of he knew not what.

"Whom hast thou there? . . . A friend?" This as Sah-lûma apparently explained something in a low tone, . . . "He is welcome also for thy sake"—and he extended one hand on which a great ruby signet burned like a red star, to Theos who bending over it, kissed it with the grave courtesy he fancied due to kings. Zephorânim appeared good-naturedly surprised at this action, and eyed him somewhat scruti- nizingly as he said—"Thou art not of Sah- lûma's divine calling assuredly, fair sir, else thou wouldst hardly stoop to a mere crowned head like mine! Soldiers and statesmen may bend the knee to their chosen rulers, but to whom shall poets bend? They, who with arrowy lines cause thrones to totter and fall,— they who with deathless utterance brand with infamy or hallow with honour the most potent names of kings and emperors,—they by whom alone a nation lives in the annals of the future, —what homage do such elect gods owe to the passing holders of one or more earthly sceptres? Thou art too humble, methinks, for the min-

strel-vocation,—dost call thyself a Minstrel? or a student of the art of song?”

Theos looked up, his eyes resting full on the monarch's countenance, as he replied in low clear tones—

“Most noble Zephorânim I am no minstrel! . . . nor do I deserve to be called even a student of that high, sweet, music-wisdom in which Sah-lûma alone excels! All I dare hope for is that I may learn of him in some small degree the lessons he has mastered, that at some future time I may approach as nearly to his genius as a common flower on earth can approach to a fixed star in the furthest blue of heaven!”

Sah-lûma smiled and gave him a pleased appreciative glance,—Zephorânim regarded him somewhat curiously.

“By my faith, thou'rt a modest and gentle disciple of Poesy!” he said—“We receive thee gladly to our court as suits Sah-lûma's pleasure and our own! Stand thee near thy friend and master, and listen to the melody of his matchless voice,—thou shalt hear therein the mysteries of many things unravelled, and chiefly the mystery of love, in which all other passions centre and have power.”

Re-ascending the steps of the dais, he flung himself indolently back in his throne,—where-

upon two pages brought a magnificent chair of inlaid ivory and placed it near the foot of the dais at his right hand. In this Sah-lûma seated himself, the pages arranging his golden mantle around him in shining picturesque folds,—while Theos withdrawing slightly into the back-ground, stood leaning against a piece of tapestry on which the dead figure of a man was depicted lying prone on the sward with a great wound in his heart, and a bird of prey hovering above him expectant of its grim repast. Kneeling on one knee close to Sah-lûma, the harp-bearer put the harp in tune, and swept his fingers lightly over the strings,—then came a pause. A clear small bell chimed sweetly on the stillness, and the King, raising himself a little, signed to a black slave who carried a tall silver wand emblematic of some office.

“Let the women enter!” he commanded—
 “Speak but Sah-lûma’s name and they will gather like waves rising to the moon,—but bid them be silent as they come lest they disturb thoughts more lasting than their loveliness.”

This with a significant glance towards the Laureate who, sunk in his ivory chair seemed rapt in meditation. His beautiful face had grown grave, . even sad, . . he played idly with the ornaments at his belt, . and his eyes had a

drowsy yet ardent light within them, as they flashed now and then from under the shade of his long curling lashes. The slave departed on his errand . . . and Zabâstes edging himself out from the hushed and attentive throng of nobles stood as it were in the foreground of the picture, his thin lips twisted into a sneer, and his lean hands grasping his staff viciously as though he longed to strike somebody down with it.

A moment or so passed, . and then the slave returned, his silver rod uplifted, marshalling in a lovely double procession of white-veiled female figures that came gliding along as noiselessly as fair ghosts from forgotten tombs, each one carrying a garland of flowers. They floated, rather than walked, up to the royal dais, and there prostrated themselves two by two before the King whose fiery glance rested upon them more carelessly than tenderly,—and as they rose, they threw back their veils, displaying to full view such exquisite faces, such languishing brilliant eyes, such snow-white necks and arms, such graceful, voluptuous forms, that Theos caught at the tapestry near him in reeling dazzlement of sight and sense, and wondered how Sah-lûma seated tranquilly in the reflective attitude he had assumed, could maintain so unmoved and indifferent a demeanour.

Indifferent he was however, even when the unveiled fair ones, turning from the King to the Poet, laid all their garlands at his feet,—he scarcely noticed the piled-up flowers, and still less the lovely donors, who, retiring modestly backwards, took their places on low silken divans provided for their accommodation in a semi-circle round the throne. Again a silence ensued,—Sah-lûma was evidently centred like a spider in a web of his own thought-weaving,—and his attendant gently swept the strings of the harp again to recall his wandering fancies. Suddenly he looked up, . . . his eyes were sombre, and a musing trouble shadowed the brightness of his face.

“Strange it is, O King”—he said in low suppressed tones that had in them a quiver of pathetic sweetness,—“Strange it is that to-night the soul of my singing dwells on sorrow! Like a stray bird flying ’mid falling leaves, or a ship drifting out from sunlight to storm, so does my fancy soar among drear flitting images evolved from the downfall of kingdoms,—and I seem to behold in the distance, the far-off shadow of Death. . . .”

“Talk not of death!” interrupted the King loudly and in haste,—“’Tis a raven note that hath been croaked in mine ears too often and

too harshly already! What! hast thou been met by the mad Khosrûl who lately sprang on me, even as a famished wolf on prey and grasping my bridle-rein bade me prepare to die! 'Twas an ill jest, and one not to be lightly forgiven! 'Prepare to die O Zephorânim!' he cried—'For thy time of reckoning is come!' By my soul!" and the monarch broke into a boisterous laugh—"Had he bade me prepare to live 'twould have been more to the purpose! But yon frantic grey-beard prates of naught but death, . . . 'twere well he should be silenced." And as he spoke, he frowned, his hand involuntarily playing with the jewelled hilt of his sword.

"Aye,—death is an unpleasing suggestion!" suddenly said Zabâstes who had gradually moved up nearer and nearer till he made one of the group immediately round Sah-lûma—" 'Tis a word that should never be mentioned in the presence of Kings! Yet, . . notwithstanding the incivility of the statement, . . it is most certain that His Most Potent Majesty as well as His Majesty's Most Potent Laureate, *must . . die . . !*" And he accompanied the words "must . . die . . ." with two decisive taps of his staff, smacking his withered lips meanwhile as though he tasted something peculiarly savoury.

“And thou also, Zabâstes!” retorted the King with a dark smile, jestingly drawing his sword and pointing it full at him,—then, as the old Critic shrank slightly at the gleam of the bare steel, replacing it clashingly in its sheath, —“Thou also! . . . and thine ashes shall be cast to the four winds of heaven as suits thy vocation, while those of thy master and thy master’s King lie honourably urned in porphyry and gold!”

Zabâstes bowed with a sort of mock humility.

“It may be so, most mighty Zephorânim,” he returned composedly — “Nevertheless ashes are always ashes,—and the scattering of them is but a question of time! For urns of gold and porphyry do but excite the cupidity of the vulgar-minded, and the ashes therein sealed, whether of King or Poet, stand as little chance of reverent handling by future generations as those of many lesser men. And ’tis doubtful whether the winds will know any difference in the scent or quality of the various pinches of human dust tossed on their sweeping circles,—for the substance of a man reduced to earth-atoms is always the same,—and not a grain of him can prove whether he was once a Monarch crowned, a Minstrel pampered, or a Critic contemned!”

And he chuckled, as one having the best of the argument. The King deigned no answer, but turned his eyes again on Sah-lûma who still sat pensively silent.

“ How long wilt thou be mute, my singing-emperor ? ” he demanded gently—“ Canst thou not improvise a canticle of love even in the midst of thy soul’s sudden sadness ? ”

At this, Sah-lûma roused himself,—signing to his attendant, he took the harp from him, and resting it lightly on one knee, passed his hands over it once or twice, half musingly, half doubtfully. A ripple of music answered his delicate touch,—music as soft as the evening wind murmuring among willows. Another instant, and his voice thrilled on the silence,—a voice wonderful, far-reaching, mellow and luscious as with suppressed tears, containing within it a passion that pierced to the heart of the listener, and a divine fulness such as surely was never before heard in human tones !

Theos leaned forward breathlessly, his pulses beating with unwonted rapidity, what . . . *what* was it that Sah-lûma sang ? A Love-song !,—in those caressing vowel-sounds which composed the language of Al-Kyris, . . a love-song, burning as strong wine, tender as the murmur of the sea on mellow moon-entranced

evenings,—an arrowy shaft of rhyme tipped with fire and meant to strike home to the core of feeling and there inflict delicious wounds! but, as each well-chosen word echoed harmoniously on his ears, Theos shrank back shuddering in every limb, . . . a black frozen numbness seemed to pervade his being,—an awful maddening terror possessed his brain and he felt as though he were suddenly thrown into a vast dark chaos where no light should ever shine! For Sah-lûma's song was *his* song! . . . *his own, his very own!* . . . He knew it well! He had written it long ago in the hey-day of his youth when he had fancied all the world was waiting to be set to the music of his inspiration, . . . he recognized every fancy, . . . every couplet . . . every rhyme! . . . The delicate glowing ballad was *his, . . . his alone!* . . . and Sah-lûma had no right to it! He, Theos was the Poet, . . . not this royally favoured Laureate who had stolen his ideas and filched his jewels of thought . . . aye! and he would tell him so to his face! he would speak! he would cry aloud his claims in the presence of the King and demand instant justice!

He strove for utterance,—his voice was gone! . . . his lips were moveless as the lips of a stone image! Stricken absolutely mute, but

ARDATH.

with his sense of hearing quickened to an almost painful acuteness, he stood erect and motionless,—rage and fear contending in his heart, enduring the torture of a truly terrific mystery of mind-despair, . . . forced, in spite of himself, to listen passively to the love-thoughts of his own dead Past revived anew in his Rival's singing!





CHAPTER VI.

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

A FEW slow dreadful minutes elapsed, . . and then,—then the first sharpness of his strange mental agony subsided. The strained tension of his nerves gave way, and a dull apathy of grief inconsolable settled upon him. He felt himself to be a man mysteriously accurst,—banished as it were out of life and stripped of all he had once held dear and valuable. *How had it happened?* Why was he set apart thus solitary, poor, and empty of all worth, *while another reaped the fruits of his genius?* He heard the loud plaudits of the assembled court shaking the vast hall as the Laureate ended his song—and, drooping his head, some stinging tears welled up in his eyes and fell scorchingly on his clasped hands—tears wrung from the very depth of his secretly tortured soul. At that moment the beautiful Sah-lûma

turned towards him smiling, as one who looked for more sympathetic approbation than that offered by a mixed throng,—and meeting that happy self-conscious, bland, half-inquiring gaze, he strove his best to return the smile. Just then Zephorânim's fiery glance swept over him with a curious expression of wonder and commiseration.

“By the gods, yon stranger weeps!” said the monarch in a half bantering tone, . . then with more gentleness he added. . “Yet 'tis not the first time Sah-lûma's voice hath unsealed a fountain of tears! No greater triumph can minstrel have than this,—to move the strong's man's heart to woman's tenderness! We have heard tell of poets, who singing of death have persuaded many straightway to die,—but when they sing of sweeter themes, of lovers' vows, of passion-frenzies, and languorous desires, cold is the blood that will not warm and thrill to their divinely eloquent allurements. Come hither, fair sir!” and he beckoned to Theos who mechanically advanced in obedience to the command—“Thou hast thoughts of thine own doubtless, concerning Love, and Love's fervour of delight, . . hast aught new to tell us of its bewildering spells, whereby the most dauntless heroes in every 'age have been

caught, conquered and bound by no stronger chain than a tress of hair, or a kiss more luscious than all the honey hidden in lotus-flowers?"

Theos looked up dreamily. . . his eyes wandered from the King to Sah-lûma as though in wistful search for some missing thing, . . his lips were parched and burning and his brows ached with a heavy weight of pain, . . but he made an effort to speak and succeeded, though his words came slowly and without any previous reflection on his own part.

"Alas, most potent Sovereign!" he murmured . . "I am a man of sad memories, whose soul is like the desert, barren of all beauty! I may have sung of love in my time, but my songs were never new,—never worthy to last one little hour! And whatsoever of faith, passion or heart-ecstasy my fancy could with devious dreams devise, Sah-lûma knows, . . and in Sah-lûma's song all my best thoughts are said!"

There was a ring of intense pathos in his voice as he spoke,—and the King eyed him compassionately.

"Of a truth thou seemest to have suffered!" he observed in gentle accents . . "Thou hast a look as of one bereft of joy. Hast lost some maiden love of thine? . . and dost thou mourn her still?"

A pang bitter as death shot through Theos's heart, . . . had the monarch suddenly pierced him with his great sword he could scarcely have endured more anguish! For the knowledge rushed upon him that he had indeed lost a love so faithful, so unfathomable, so pure and perfect, that all the world weighed in the balance against it would have seemed but a grain of dust compared to its inestimable value! . . . but what that love was, and from whom it emanated, he could no more tell than the tide can tell in syllabled language the secret of its attraction to the moon. Therefore he made no answer, . . . only a deep half-smothered sigh broke from him, . . . and Zephorânim apparently touched by his dejection continued good-naturedly—

“Nay nay!—we will not seek to pry into the cause of thy spirit's heaviness, . . . Enough! think no more of our thoughtless question,—there is a sacredness in sorrow! Nevertheless we shall strive to make thee in part forget thy grief ere thou leavest our court and city, . . . meanwhile sit thou there”—and he pointed to the lower step of the dais, . . . “And thou, Sah-lûma, sing again, and this time let thy song be set to a less plaintive key.”

He leaned back in his throne, and Theos sat wearily down among the flowers at the foot of

the dais as commanded. He was possessed by a strange inward dread,—the dread of altogether losing the consciousness of his own identity,—and while he strove to keep a firm grasp on his mental faculties he at the same time abandoned all hope of ever extricating himself from the perplexing enigma in which he was so darkly involved. Forcing himself by degrees into comparative calmness, he determined to resign himself to his fate,—and the idea he had just had of boldly claiming the ballad sung by Sah-lûma as his own, completely passed out of his mind.

How could he speak against this friend whom he loved,...aye!—more than he had ever loved any living thing!—besides what could he prove? To begin with, in his present condition he could give no satisfactory account of himself,—if he were asked questions concerning his nation or birthplace he could not answer them, . . he did not even know where he had come from, save that his memory persistently furnished him with the name of a place called “ARDATH.” But what was this “Ardath” to him, he mused?—What did it signify? . . what had it to do with his immediate position?—Nothing, so far as he could tell! His intellect seemed to be divided into two

parts,—one a total blank, . . . the other filled with crowding images that while novel were yet curiously familiar. And how could he accuse Sah-lûma of literary theft, when he had none of his own dated manuscripts to bear out his case? Of course he could easily repeat his boyhood's verses word for word, . . . but what of that? He, a stranger in the city, befriended and protected by the Laureate, would certainly be considered by the people of Al-Kyris as far more likely to steal Sah-lûma's thoughts than that Sah-lûma should steal his!

No!—there was no help for it,—as matters stood he could say nothing,—he could only feel as though he were the sorrowful ghost of some long-ago dead author returned to earth to hear others claiming his works and passing them off as original compositions. And thus he was scarcely moved to any fresh surprise when Sah-lûma, giving back the harp to his attendant, rose up, and standing erect in an attitude unequalled for grace and dignity, began to recite a poem he remembered to have written when he was about twenty years of age,—a poem daringly planned, which when published had aroused the bitterest animosity of the press critics on account of what they called its 'forced sublimity.' The sublimity

was by no means 'forced'—it was the spontaneous outcome of a fresh and ardent nature full of enthusiasm and high-soaring aspiration, but the critics cared nothing for this, . . . all they saw was a young man presuming to be original, and down they came upon him accordingly.

He recollected all the heart-sore sufferings he had endured through that ill-fated and cruelly condemned composition,—and now he was listlessly amazed at the breathless rapture and excitement it evoked here in this marvellous city of Al-Kyris, where everything seemed more strange and weird than the strangest dream! It was a story of the gods before the world was made,—of love deep buried in far eternities of light, . . . of vast celestial shapes whose wanderings through the blue deep of space were tracked by the birth of stars and suns and wonder-spheres of beauty, . . . a fanciful legend of transcendent heavenly passion, telling how all created worlds throbbed amorously in the purple seas of pure ether, and how Love and Love alone was the dominant cloud of the triumphal march of the Universe And with what matchless eloquence Sah-lûma spoke the glowing lines! . . . with what clear and rounded tenderness of accent! . . . how exquisitely his voice rose and fell in a rhythmic rush like the wind

surging through many leaves, while ever and anon in the very midst of the divinely entrancing joy that chiefly characterized the poem, his musicianly art infused a touch of minor pathos,—a suggestion of the eternal complaint of Nature which even in the happiest moments asserts itself in mournful under-tones. The effect of his splendid declamation was heightened by a few soft running passages dexterously played on the harp by his attendant harpist and introduced just at the right moments ;—and Theos, notwithstanding the peculiar position in which he was placed, listened to every well-remembered word of his own work thus recited with a gradually deepening sense of peace,—he knew not why, for the verses, in themselves, were strangely passionate and wild. The various impressions produced on the hearers were curious to witness—the King moved restlessly, his bronzed cheeks alternately flushing and paling, his hand now grasping his sword, now toying with the innumerable jewels that blazed on his breast—the women's eyes at one moment sparkled with delight and at the next grew humid with tears,—the assembled courtiers pressed forward, awed, eager and attentive,—the very soldiers on guard seemed entranced, and not even a

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

small side-whisper disturbed the harmonious fall and flow of dulcet speech that rippled from the Laureate's lips.

When he ceased, there broke forth such a tremendous uproar of applause that the amber pendants of the lamps swung to and fro in the strong vibration of so many uplifted voices,—shouts of frenzied rapture echoed again and again through the vaulted roof like thuds of thunder,—shouts in which Theos joined,—as why should he not? He had as good a right as any one to applaud his own poem! . It had been sufficiently abused heretofore,—he was glad to find it now so well appreciated, at least in Al-Kyris,—though he had no intention of putting forward any claim to its authorship. No,—for it was evident he had in some inscrutable way been made an outcast from all literary honour,—and a sort of wild recklessness grew up within him,—a bitter mirth, arising from curiously mingled feelings of scorn for himself and tenderness for Sah-lûma,—and it was in this spirit that he loudly cheered the triumphant robber of his stores of poesy, and even kept up the plaudits long after they might possibly have been discontinued. Never perhaps did any poet receive a grander ovation, . . . but the exquisitely tranquil vanity of the Laureate was

not a whit moved by it, . . . his dazzling smile dawned like a gleam of sunshine all over his beautiful face, but save for this, he gave no sign of even hearing the deafening acclamations that resounded about him on all sides.

“A new Hyspiros!” cried the King enthusiastically, and, detaching a magnificently cut ruby from among the gems he wore, he flung it towards his favoured minstrel. It flashed through the air like a bright spark of flame and fell, glistening redly on the pavement just half way between Theos and Sah-lûma, . . . Theos eyed it with faintly amused indifference, . . . the Laureate bowed gracefully, but did not stoop to raise it,—he left that task to his harp-bearer, who taking it up, presented it to his master humbly on one knee. Then, and only then Sah-lûma received it, kissed it lightly and placed it negligently among his other ornaments, smiling at the King as he did so with the air of one who graciously condescends to accept a gift out of kindly feeling for the donor. Zabâstes meanwhile had witnessed the scene with an expression of mingled impatience, malignity and disgust written plainly on his furrowed features and as soon as the hubbub of applause had subsided, he struck his staff on the ground with an angry clang, and exclaimed irritably—

“ Now may the gods shield us from a plague of fools! What means this throaty clamour? Ye praise what ye do not understand like all the rest of the discerning public! Many is the time, as the weariness of my spirit witnesseth, that I have heard Sah-lûma rehearse,—but never in all my experience of his prolix multiloquence, hath he given utterance to such a senseless jingle-jangle of verse-jargon as to-night! Strange it is that the so-called ‘poetical’ trick of confusedly heaping words together regardless of meaning, should so bewilder men and deprive them of all wise and sober judgment! By my faith!.. I would as soon listen to the gabble of geese in a farm-yard as to the silly glibness of such inflated twaddle, such mawkish sentiment, such turgid garrulity, such ranting verbosity”

A burst of laughter interrupted and drowned his harsh voice,—laughter in which no one joined more heartily than Sah-lûma himself. He had resumed his seat in his ivory chair, and leaning back lazily, he surveyed his Critic with tolerant good-humour and complete amusement, while the King’s stentorian “Ha, ha, ha!” resounded in ringing peals through the great audience-chamber.

“Thou droll knave!” cried Zephorânim at

last, dashing away the drops his merriment had brought into his eyes—"Wilt kill me with thy bitter-mouthed jests? . . . of a truth my sides ache at thee! What ails thee now? . . . Come,—we will have patience, if so be our mirth can be restrained,—speak!—what flaw canst thou find in our Sah-lûma's pearl of poesy?—what spots on the sun of his divine inspiration? As the Serpent lives, thou art an excellent mountebank and well deservest thy master's pay!"

He laughed again,—but Zabâstes seemed in no wise disconcerted. His withered countenance appeared to harden itself into lines of impenetrable obstinacy,—tucking his long staff under his arm he put his fingers together in the manner of one who inwardly counts up certain numbers, and with a preparatory smack of his lips he began—

"Free speech being permitted to me, O most mighty Zephorânim, I would in the first place say that the poem so greatly admired by your Majesty, is totally devoid of common sense. It is purely a caprice of the imagination,—and what is imagination? A mere aberration of the cerebral nerves,—a morbidity of brain in which the thoughts brood on the impossible,—on things that have never been, and never will be. Thus, Sah-lûma's verse resembles the in-

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

coherent ravings of a moon-struck madman,— moreover it hath a prevailing tone of *forced sublimity* . . .” here Theos gave an involuntary start,—then, recollecting where he was, resumed his passive attitude—“which is in every way distasteful to the ears that love plain language. For instance, what warrant is there for this most foolish line—

“*The solemn chanting of the midnight stars*’.

’Tis vile, ’tis vile! for who ever heard the midnight stars or any other stars chant? . . . who can prove that the heavenly bodies are given to the study of music? Hath Sah-lûma been present at their singing lesson?” Here the old critic chuckled, and warming with his subject, advanced a step nearer to the throne as he went on . . . “Hear yet another jarring simile—

“*The wild winds moan for pity of the world*.’—

Was ever a more indiscreet lie? A brazen lie!—for the tales of shipwreck sufficiently prove the pitilessness of winds,—and however much a verse-weaver may pretend to be in the confidence of Nature, he is after all but the dupe of his own frenetic dreams. One couplet hath most discordantly annoyed my senses—’tis the veriest doggerel—

“*The sun with amorous clutch
Tears off the emerald girdle of the rose!*”

O monstrous piece of extravagance!—for how can the Sun (his Deity set apart) ‘clutch’ without hands?—and as for ‘the emerald girdle of the rose’—I know not what it means, unless Sah-lûma considers the green calyx of the flower a ‘girdle’ in which case his wits must be far gone, for no shape of girdle can any sane man descry in the common natural protection of a bud before it blooms! There was a phrase too concerning nightingales,—and the gods know we have heard enough and too much of those over-praised birds!..” Here he was interrupted by one of his frequent attacks of coughing, and again the laughter of the whole court broke forth in joyous echoes.

“Laugh—laugh!” said Zabâstes recovering himself and eyeing the throng with a derisive smile—“Laugh, ye witless bantlings born of folly!—and cling as ye will to the unsubstantial dreams your Laureate blows for you in the air like a child playing with soap-bubbles! Empty and perishable are they all,—they shine for a moment, then break and vanish,—and the colours wherewith they sparkled, colours deemed immortal in their beauty, shall pass away like a breath and be renewed no more!”

“Not so!” interposed Theos suddenly,

unknowing why he spoke but feeling inwardly compelled to take up Sah-lûma's defence—"For the colours *are* immortal, and permeate the Universe whether seen in the soap-bubble or the rainbow! Seven tones of light exist, co-equal with the seven tones in music, and much of what we call Art and Poesy is but the constant reflex of these never-dying tints and sounds. Can a Critic enter more closely into the secrets of Nature than a Poet? . . nay!—for he would undo all creation were he able, and find fault with its fairest productions! The critical mind dwells too persistently on the mere surface of things ever to comprehend or probe the central deeps and well-springs of thought. Will a Zabâstes move us to tears and passion? . . Will he make our pulses beat with any happier thrill, or stir our blood into a warmer glow? He may be able to sever the petals of a lily and name its different sections, its way of growth and habitude,—but can he raise it from the ground alive and fair, a perfect flower, full of sweet odours and still sweeter suggestions? No!—but Sah-lûma with entrancing art can make us see, not one lily but a thousand lilies, all waving in the light wind of his fancy,—not one world but a thousand worlds, circling through the empyrean

of his rhythmic splendour,—not one joy but a thousand joys, all quivering song-wise through the radiance of his clear illumined inspiration. The heart,—the human heart alone is the final touchstone of a poet's genius,—and when that responds, who shall deny his deathless fame !”

Loud applause followed these words, and the King leaning forward, clapped Theos familiarly on the shoulder.

“ Bravely spoken, sir stranger !” he exclaimed —“ Thou hast well vindicated thy friend's honour ! And by my soul !—thou hast a musical tongue of thine own !—who knows but that thou also may be a poet yet in time to come !—And thou Zabâstes—” here he turned upon the old Critic who while Theos spoke, had surveyed him with much cynical disdain—“ get thee hence ! Thine arguments are all at fault as usual ! Thou art thyself a disappointed author—hence thy spleen ! Thou art blind and deaf, selfish and obstinate,—for thee the very sun is a blot rather than a brightness,—thou couldst, in thine own opinion, have created a fairer luminary doubtless had the matter been left to thee ! Aye, aye !—we know thee for a beauty-hating fool,—and though we laugh at thee, we find thee wear-

some! Stand thou aside and be straightway forgotten!—we will entreat Sah-lûma for another song.”

The discomfited Zabâstes retired, grumbling to himself in an under-tone,—and the Laureate whose dreamy eyes had till now rested on Theos, his self-constituted advocate, with an appreciative and almost tender regard, once more took up his harp, and striking a few rich soft chords was about to sing again, when a great noise as of clanking armour was heard outside, mingled with a steadily increasing sonorous hum of many voices and the increased tramp, tramp of marching feet. The doors were flung open,—the Herald-in-Waiting entered in hot haste and excitement, and prostrating himself before the throne exclaimed

“O great King, may thy name live for ever! Khosrûl is taken!”

Zephorânim’s black brows drew together in a dark scowl and he set his lips hard.

“So! For once thou art quick-tongued in the utterance of news!” he said half-scornfully—“Bring hither the captive,—an he chafes at his bonds we will ourselves release him..” and he touched his sword significantly—“to a wider freedom than is found on earth!”

A thrill ran through the courtly throng at these words, and the women shuddered and grew pale. Sah-lûma, irritated at the sudden interruption that had thus distracted the general attention from his own fair and flattered self, gave an expressively petulant glance towards Theos, who smiled back at him soothingly as one who seeks to coax a spoilt child out of its ill-humour, and then all eyes were turned expectantly towards the entrance of the audience-chamber.

A band of soldiers clad from head to foot in glittering steel armour, and carrying short drawn swords, appeared, and marched with quick ringing steps across the hall towards the throne—arrived at the dais, they halted, wheeled about, saluted, and parted asunder in two compact lines, thus displaying in their midst the bound and manacled figure of a tall gaunt, wild-looking old man, with eyes that burned like bright flames beneath the cavernous shadow of his bent and shelving brows,—a man whose aspect was so grand, and withal so terrible, that an involuntary murmur of mingled admiration and affright broke from the lips of all assembled, like a low wind surging among leaf-laden branches. This was Khosrûl,—the Prophet of a creed that was to revolutionize the world,—the fanatic for a faith as yet un-

revealed to men,—the dauntless foreteller of the downfall of Al-Kyris and its King!

Theos stared wonderingly at him . . . at his funereal black garments which clung to him with the closeness of a shroud,—at his long untrimmed beard and snow-white hair that fell in disordered matted locks below his shoulders,—at his majestic form which in spite of cords and fetters he held firmly erect in an attitude of fearless and composed dignity. There was something supernaturally grand and awe-inspiring about him, . . . something commanding as well as defiant in the straight and steady look with which he confronted the King,—and for a moment or so a deep silence reigned,—silence apparently born of superstitious dread inspired by the mere fact of his presence. Zephorânim's glance rested upon him with cold and supercilious indifference,—seated haughtily upright in his throne, with one hand resting on the hilt of his sword, he showed no sign of anger against, or interest in his prisoner, save that to the observant eye of Theos, the veins in his forehead seemed to become suddenly knotted and swollen, while the jewels on his bare chest heaved restlessly up and down with the unquiet panting of his quickened breath.

“We give thee greeting, Khosrûl!” he said

slowly and with a sinister smile—"The Lion's paw has struck thee down at last! Too long hast thou trifled with our patience,—thou must abjure thy heresies, . or die! What sayest thou now of doom,—of judgment—of the waning of glory? Wilt prophesy? . . wilt denounce the Faith? . . wilt mislead the people? . . wilt curse the King? . . Thou mad sorcerer!—devil-bewitched and blasphemous! . . What shall hinder me from at once slaying thee?" And he half drew his formidable sword from its sheath.

Khosrûl met his threatening gaze unflinchingly.

"Nothing shall hinder thee, Zephorânim," he replied, and his voice, deeply musical and resonant, struck to Theos's heart with a strange foreboding chill—"Nothing—save thine own scorn of cowardice!"

The monarch's hand fell from his sword-hilt, —a flush of shame reddened his dark face. He bent his fiery eyes full on the captive—and there was something in the sorrowful grandeur of the old man's bearing, coupled with his enfeebled and defenceless condition that seemed to touch him with a sense of compassion, for, turning suddenly to the armed guard, he raised his hand with a gesture of authority . . .

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

“Unloose his fetters!” he commanded.

The men hesitated, apparently doubting whether they had heard aright.

Zephorânim stamped his foot impatiently.

“Unloose him I say! . . . By the gods! must I repeat the same thing twice? Since when have soldiers grown deaf to the voice of their sovereign? . . . And why have ye bound this aged fool with such many and tight bonds? . . . his veins and sinews are not of iron,—methinks ye might have tied him with thread and met but small resistance! I have known many a muscular deserter from the army fastened less securely when captured! Unloose him—and quickly too!—Our pleasure is that ere he dies, he shall speak as he will, in his own defence as a free man.”

In trembling haste and eagerness the guards at once set to work to obey this order. The twisted cords were untied, the heavy iron fetters wrenched asunder,—and in a very short space Khosrûl stood at comparative liberty. At first he did not seem to understand the King's generosity towards him in this respect, for he made no attempt to move,—his limbs were rigidly composed as though they were still bound,—and so stiff and motionless was his weird attenuated figure that Theos behold-

ing him, began to wonder whether he were made of actual flesh and blood, or whether he might not more possibly be some gaunt spectre, forced back by mystic art from another world in order to testify of things unknown to living men. Zephorânim meanwhile called for his cup-bearer, a beautiful youth radiant as Gany-mede, who at a sign from his royal master approached the Prophet, and pouring wine from a jewelled flagon into a goblet of gold, offered it to him with a courteous salute and smile. Khosrûl started violently like one suddenly wakened from a deep dream,—shading his eyes with his lean and wrinkled hand he stared dubiously at the young and gaily-attired servitor,—then pushed the goblet aside with a shuddering gesture of aversion.

“Away . . . Away !” he muttered in a thrilling whisper that penetrated to every part of the vast hall—“Wilt force me to drink blood ?” He paused,—and in the same low horror-stricken tone, continued . . . “Blood . . . Blood ! It stains the earth and sky ! . . . its red red waves swallow up the land ! . . . The heavens grow pale and tremble,—the silver stars blacken and decay, and the winds of the desert make lament for that which shall come to pass ere ever the grapes be pressed or the harvest

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

gathered! Blood . . . blood! The blood of the innocent! . . 'tis a scarlet sea, wherein like a broken and empty ship, Al-Kyris founders . . founders . . never to rise again!"

These words, uttered with such hushed yet passionate intensity produced a most profound impression. Several courtiers exchanged uneasy glances, and the women half rose from their seats, looking towards the King as though silently requesting permission to retire. But an imperious negative sign from Zephorânim obliged them to resume their places, though they did so with obvious nervous reluctance.

"Thou art mad, Khosrûl"—then said the monarch in calmly measured accents—"And for thy madness, as also for thine age, we have till now retarded justice, out of pity. Nevertheless, excess of pity in great Kings too oft degenerates into weakness—and this we cannot suffer to be said of us, not even for the sake of sparing thy few poor remaining years. Thou hast over-stepped the limit of our leniency, — and madman as thou art, thou showest a madman's cunning,—thou dost break the laws and art dangerous to the realm,—thou art proved a traitor, and must straightway die. Thou art accused . . ."

"Of honesty!" interrupted Khosrûl sud-

denly, with a touch of melancholy satire in his tone . . . “I have spoken Truth in an age of lies! ’Tis a most death-worthy deed!”

He ceased, and again seemed to retire within himself as though he were a Voice entering at will into the carven image of man. Zephorânim frowned angrily, yet answered nothing—and a brief pause ensued. Theos grew more and more painfully interested in the scene,—there was something in it that to his mind seemed fatefully suggestive and fraught with impending evil. Suddenly Sah-lûma looked up, his bright face alit with laughter.

“Now by the Sacred Veil,”—he said gaily, addressing himself to the King—“Your Majesty considers this venerable gentleman with too much gravity! I recognize in him one of my craft,—a poet, tragic and taciturn of humour and with a taste for melodramatic simile, . . . marked you not the mixing of his word-colours in the picture he drew of Al-Kyris, foundering like a wrecked ship in a blood-red sea, whilst overhead trembled a white sky set thick with blackening stars? As I live, ’twas not ill-devised for a madman’s brain! . . . and so solemn a ranter should serve your Majesty to make merriment withal, in place of my poor Zabâstes whose peevish jests grow somewhat stale owing

to the Critic's chronic want of originality! Nay, I myself shall be willing to enter into a rhyming joust with so disconsolately morose a contemporary, and who knows whether betwixt us twain, the chords of the major and minor may not be harmonized in some new and altogether marvellous fashion of music such as we wot not of!" And turning to Khosrûl he added—"Wilt break a lance of song with me, sir gray-beard? Thou shalt croak of death, and I will chant of love,—and the King shall pronounce judgment as to which melody hath the most potent and lasting sweetness!"

Khosrûl lifted his head and met the Laureate's half-mirthful, half-mocking smile with a look of infinite compassion in his own deep, solemnly penetrating eyes.

"Thou poor deluded singer of a perishable day!" he said mournfully—"Alas for thee, that thou must die so soon, and be so soon forgotten! Thy fame is worthless as a grain of sand blown by the breath of the sea!.. thy pride and thy triumph evanescent as the mists of the morning that vanish in the heat of the sun! Great has been the measure of thine inspiration,—yet thou hast missed its true teaching,—and of all the golden threads of poesy placed freely in thy hands thou hast not woven

one clue whereby thou shouldst find God! Alas Sah-lûma! Bright soul unconscious of thy fate!.. Thou shalt be suddenly and roughly slain, . and *there* sits thy destroyer!"

And as he spoke he raised his shrunken skeleton-like hand and pointed steadfastly to,— the King! There was a momentary hush... a stillness as of stupefied amazement and horror,.. then, to the apparent relief of all present, Zephorânim burst out laughing.

"By all the virtues of Nagâya!" he cried— "This is most excellent fooling! I, Zephorânim, the destroyer of my friend and first favourite in the realm?.. Old man, thy frenzy exceeds belief and exhausts patience,—though of a truth I am sorry for the shattering of thy wits, —'tis sad that reason should be lacking to one so revered and grave of aspect. Dear to me as my royal crown is the life of Sah-lûma, through whose inspired writings alone my name shall live in the annals of future history—for the glory of a great poet must ever surpass the renown of the greatest King. Were Al-Kyris besieged by a thousand enemies, and these strong palace-walls razed to the ground by the engines of warfare, we would ourselves defend Sah-lûma!—aye, even cry aloud in the heat of combat that he, the Chief Minstrel of

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

our land should be sheltered from fury and spared from death, as the only one capable of chronicling our vanquishment or victory!"

Sah-lûma smiled and bowed gracefully in response to this enthusiastic assurance of his sovereign's friendship,—but nevertheless there was a slight shadow of uneasiness on his bold beautiful brows. He had evidently been uncomfortably impressed by Khosrûl's words, and the restless anxiety reflected in his face communicated itself by a sort of electric thrill to Theos whose heart began to beat heavily with a sense of vague alarm. "What is this Khosrûl?" he thought half resentfully—"and how dares he predict for the adored, the admired Sah-lûma so dark and unmerited an end? . . ." Hark! . . . what was that low far-off rumbling as of underground wheels rolling at full speed? . . . He listened,—then glanced at those persons who stood nearest to him, . . . no one seemed to hear anything unusual. Moreover all eyes were fixed fearfully on Khosrûl whose before rigidly sombre demeanour had suddenly changed, and who now with raised head, tossed hair, outstretched arms, and wild gestures looked like a flaming Terror personified.

"Victory . . . Victory!" he cried, catching at

the King's last word. . . " There shall be no more victory for thee, Zephorânim ! . . Thy conquests are ended, and the flag of thy glory shall cease to wave on the towers of thy strong citadels ! Death stands behind thee ! . . Destruction clamours at thy palace-gates ! . . and the enemy that cometh upon thee unawares is an enemy that none shall vanquish or subdue, not even they who are mightiest among the mighty ! Thy strong men of war shall be trodden down as wheat,—thy captains and rulers shall tremble and wail as children bewildered with fear,—thy great engines of battle shall be to thee as naught,—and the arrows of thy skilled archers shall be useless as straws in the gathering tempest of fire and fury ! Zephorânim ! Zephorânim ! . ." and his voice shrilled with terrific emphasis through the vaulted chamber. . . " The days of recompense are come upon thee,—swift and terrible as the desert-wind ! . . The doom of Al-Kyris is spoken and who shall avert its fulfilment ! Al-Kyris the Magnificent shall fall . . shall fall ! . . its beauty, its greatness, its pleasantness, its power, shall be utterly destroyed . . and ere the waning of the midsummer moon not one stone of its glorious buildings shall be left to prove that here was once a city ! Fire ! . . Fire ! . ." and here he ran abruptly to

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

the foot of the royal dais, his dark garments brushing against Theos as he passed,—and springing on the first step, stood boldly within hand-reach of the King who, taken aback by the suddenness of his action, stared at him with a sort of amazed and angry fascination . . . “ To arms, Zephorânim ! . . . To arms ! . . . take up thy sword and shield . . . get thee forth and fight with fire ! Fire ! . . . How shall the King quench it ? . . . how shall the mighty monarch defend his people against it ? See you not how it fills the air with red devouring tongues of flame ! . . . the thick smoke reeks of blood ! . . . Al-Kyris the Magnificent, the pleasant city of sin, the idolatrous city, is broken in pieces and is become a waste of ashes ! Who will join with me in a lament for Al-Kyris ? I will call upon the desert of the sea to hear my voice, . . . I will pour forth my sorrows on the wind, and it shall carry the burden of grief to the four quarters of the earth,—all nations shall shudder and be astonished at the direful end of Al-Kyris, the city beautiful, the empress of kingdoms ! Woe unto Al-Kyris, for she hath suffered herself to be led astray by her rulers ! . . . she hath drunken deep of the innocent blood and hath followed after idols, . . . her abominations are manifold and the hearts of her young men and maidens are full

of evil ! Therefore because Al-Kyris delighteth in pride and despiseth repentance, so shall destruction descend furiously upon her, even as a sudden tempest in the mid-watches of the night,—she shall be swept away from the surface of the earth, . . . wolves shall make their lair in her pleasant gardens, and the generations of men shall remember her no more ! O ye kings, princes, and warriors !—Weep, weep for the doom of Al-Kyris !” and now his wild voice sank by degrees into a piteous plaintiveness—“ Weep !—for never again on earth shall be found a fairer dwelling-place for the lovers of joy ! . . . never again shall be builded a grander city for the glory and wealth of a people ! Al-Kyris ! Al-Kyris ! Thou that boastest of ancient days and long lineage ! . . . thou art become a forgotten heap of ruin ! . . . the sands of the desert shall cover thy temples and palaces, and none hereafter shall enquire concerning thee ! None shall bemoan thee, . . . none shall shed tears for the grievous manner of thy death, . . . none shall know the names of thy mighty heroes and men of fame,—for thou shalt vanish utterly and be lost far out of memory even as though thou hadst never been ! ”

Here he stopped abruptly and caught his breath hard,—his blazing eyes preternaturally

THE PROPHEÏ OF DOOM.

large and brilliant fixed themselves steadfastly on the sculptured ivory shield that surmounted the back of the King's throne, and over his drawn and wrinkled features came an expression of such ghastly horror that instinctively every one present turned their looks in the same direction. Suddenly a shriek, piercing and terrible, broke from his lips,—a shriek that like a swiftly descending knife seemed to saw the air discordantly asunder.

“See . . . See!” he cried in fierce haste and eagerness . . . “See how the crested head gleams! . . . How the soft shiny throat curves and glistens! . . . how the lithe body twists and twines! . . . Hence!—Hence, accursèd Snake! . . . thou poisoner of peace! . . . thou quivering sting in the flesh!—thou destroyer of the strength of manhood! What hast thou to do with Zephorânim, that thou dost wind thy many coils about his heart? . . . Lysia! . . . Lysia! . . .” here the King started violently, his face flushing darkly red, “Thou delicate abomination!, . . . Thou tyrannous treachery! . . . what shall be done unto thee in the hour of darkness! Put off, put off the ornaments of gold and the jewels wherewith thou adornest thy beauty, and crown thyself with the crown of an endless affliction! . . . for thou shalt be

girdled round about with flame, and fire shall be thy garment! . . . thy lips that have drunken sweet wine shall be steeped in bitterness!—vainly shalt thou make thyself fair and call aloud on thy legion of lovers, . . . they shall be as dead men deaf to thine entreaties, and none shall answer thee,—no not one! None shall hide thee from shame or offer thee comfort,—in the midst of thy lascivious delights shalt thou suddenly perish! . . . and my soul shall be avenged on thy sins, thou unvirgined Virgin!—thou Queen-Courtesan!”

Scarcely had he uttered the last word, when the King with a furious oath sprang upon him, grasped him by the throat, and thrusting him fiercely down on the steps of the dais, placed one foot on his prostrate body. Then drawing his gigantic sword he lifted it on high, . . . the bright blade glittered in air . . . an audible gasp of terror broke from the throng of spectators, . . . another second, and Khosrûl's life would have paid the forfeit for his temerity . . . when crash! . . . a sudden and tremendous clap of thunder shook the hall, and every lamp was extinguished! Impenetrable darkness reigned, . . . thick, close, suffocating darkness, . . . the thunder rolled away in sullen vibrating echoes, and there was a short impressive silence. Then

piercing through the profound gloom came the clamorous cries and shrieks of frightened women, . . the horrible selfish scrambling, pushing and struggling of a bewildered panic-stricken crowd, . . the helpless, nerveless, unreasoning distraction that human beings exhibit when striving together for escape from some imminent deadly peril,—and though the King's stentorian voice could be heard above all the tumult loudly commanding order, his alternate threats and persuasions were of no avail to calm the frenzy of fear into which the whole court was thrown. Groans and sobs, . . wild entreaties to Nagâya and the Sun-God . . curses from the soldiery, who intent on saving themselves were brutally trying to force a passage to the door regardless of the wailing women, whose frantic appeals for rescue and assistance were heart-rending to hear, . . all these sounds increased the horror of the situation,—and Theos, blind, giddy and confused, listened to the uproar around him with something of the affrighted compassion that a stranger in Hell might be supposed to feel when hearkening to the ceaseless plaints of the self-tortured wicked. He endeavoured to grope his way to Sah-lûma's side,—and just then lights appeared, . . lights that were not of earth's kindling, . .

strange wandering flames that danced and flitted along the tapestried walls like will-o' the wisps on a dark morass, and flung a ghastly blue glare on the pale uneasy faces of the scared people, till gathering in a sort of lurid ring round the throne, they outlined in strong relief the enraged Titanesque figure of Zephorânim whose upraised sword looked in itself like an arrested flash of lightning. Brighter and brighter grew the weird lustre, illumining the whole scene . . . the vast length of the splendid hall, . . . the shining armour of the soldiers . . . the white robes of the women . . . the flags and pennons that hung from the roof and swayed to and fro as though blown by a gust of wind, . . . every object near and distant was soon as visible as in broad day,—and then . . . a terrible cry of rage burst from the King,—the cry of a maddened wild beast.

“Death and fury!” he shouted striking his sword with a fierce clang against the silver pedestal of the throne, . . . “Where is Khosrûl?”

The silence of an absolute dismay answered him, . . . Khosrûl had fled! Like a cloud melting in air, or a ghost vanishing into the nether-world, he had mysteriously disappeared! . . . he had escaped, no one knew how, from under the very feet and out of the very grasp of the irate

THE PROPHET OF DOOM.

monarch whose baffled wrath now knew no bounds.

“Dolts, idiots, cowards!”.. and he hurled these epithets at the timorous crowd with all the ferocity of a giant hurling stones at a swarm of pigmies.. “Babes that are frightened by a summer thunder-storm!.. Ye have let yon accursèd heretic slip from my hands ere I had choked him with his own lie! O ye fools!. Ye puny villains!.. I take shame to myself that I am King of such a race of weaklings! Lights!.. Bring lights hither, ye whimpering slaves,. ye shivering poltroons!.. What! call yourselves men!. Nay,. ye are feeble girls pranked out in men’s attire, and your steel corslets cover the faintest hearts that ever failed for dastard fear! Shut fast the palace-gates!... close every barrier!... search every court and corner, lest haply this base false Prophet be still here in hiding,— he that blasphemed with ribald tongue the High Priestess of our Faith, the holy Virgin Lysia!.. Are ye all turned renegades and traitors that ye will suffer him to go free and triumph in his lawless heresy? Ye shameless knaves!. Ye milk-veined rascals!.. what abject terror makes ye thus quiver like aspen-leaves in a storm?.. this darkness is but a conjuror’s trick to scare women, and Khosrùl’s followers can so play

with the strings of electricity that ye are duped into accepting the witch-glamour as Heaven's own cloud-flame! By the gods! If Al-Kyris falls, as yon dotard pronounceth, her ruins shall bury but few heroes! O superstitious and degraded souls! . . . I would ye were even as I am—a man dauntless, . a soldier unafraid!”

His powerful and indignant voice had the effect of partially checking the panic and restoring something like order,—the pushing and struggling for an immediate exit ceased,—the armed guards in shamed silence began to marshal themselves together in readiness to start on the search for the fugitive,—and several pages rushed in with flaring torches, which cast a wondrous fire-glow on the surging throng of eager and timid faces, the brilliant costumes, the flash of jewels, the glimmer of swords and the dark outlines of the fluttering tapestry,—all forming together a curious chiar-oscuro, from which the massive figure of Zephorânim stood out in bold and striking prominence against the white and silver background of his throne. Vaguely bewildered and lost in a dim stupefaction of wonderment, Theos looked upon everything with an odd sense of strained calmness, . . . the glittering saloon whirled before his eyes like a passing





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